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Understanding and Subverting Contemporary Right-wing Populism: preliminary notes from a critical agrarian perspective

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Understanding and Subverting Contemporary Right-wing Populism: preliminary notes from a critical agrarian perspective

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Abstract

There are awkward, and in some instances troubling, parallelisms, resemblances and interconnections between right-wing populism and the populism of agrarian movements, past and present. These are not random accidents. The political economy upon which such populisms emerged partly shapes the kind of broader politics that get constructed. The boundaries between right-wing populist currents and their social base in the countryside on the one hand, and the populism of agrarian movements on the other hand are constantly porous, blurring and malleable. This means partly that there is a slippery slope down which the populism of progressive agrarian movements may slide to reinforce rather than undermine right-wing populism. There are two urgent tasks and challenges: to avoid such a slippery slope, and to transform such parallelism, resemblances and interconnections into an extraordinary political opportunity and emancipatory force that can contribute to strategically eroding right-wing populism and to building a positive future. Accomplishing such twin tasks requires (re)claiming populism but without its authoritarian trappings, being class conscious, and eschewing romantic restorative tendencies among agrarian movements some of which are utopian, conservative or reactionary. Finally, in their political struggles within and/or against capitalism, agrarian movements are more effective if they take a socialist perspective that is broadly cast in terms of what it might mean and who could be its prime movers. Such a perspective can be grounded in simultaneous and interlinked political struggles for redistribution, recognition, restitution, and regeneration in a framework of a revolution against the entrenched centrist strategy of 'anti-subversive petty reform incrementalism' that has been promoted alongside neoliberalism. These tasks could be made to lead to, and could be pursued within, the construction of a class-conscious left-wing populism as counter-current to right-wing populism.

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1. Introduction

This essay is an initial attempt at understanding the awkward, and on some occasions troubling, parallelisms, resemblances and interconnections between right-wing populism and the populism of agrarian movements. Here, and loosely, populism is that political act of aggregating disparate social class and group interests and issues into a deliberately framed singular, homogenized voice, ‘the people’. There is nothing inherently regressive or reactionary in populism. Two types of populism are the main subjects of this paper. First is right-wing populism, which is broadly referred to here as a regressive, conservative or reactionary type of populism that fundamentally promotes or defends capitalism in the name of ‘the people’. In its current manifestation, it is also xenophobic, nationalist, racist, or misogynistic. Second is agrarian populism, which is that political bundling of various rural-based or rural-oriented social groups’ and class interests and issues into a homogenized category, ‘the people of the land’: anti-capitalist, often assumed to be rescuing agrarian communities from capitalist penetration for the purpose of advancing a ‘peasant way’ toward a particular kind of development. The provenance of the contemporary debates about agrarian (neo)populism, can be traced to the Russian agrarian populists that were active during the later part of the 19th century.¹ There are conservative or reactionary agrarian populists that fundamentally promote and defend the foundations of capitalism, and they are generally rich farmers with distinct demands that are for the defence of individual private property, avoiding labour issues, or focusing on productivist and remunerative issues, and staunchly anti-socialist.

For lack of a better term, ‘right-wing populism’ is used in this paper. A brief explanation is warranted. The logic of the notion of ‘populism as a matter of degree’ (see discussion in the next section) extends to the notion of ‘right-wing populism’, i.e. some populist currents are leaning farther towards the right than others, even when they are all fundamentally veering towards the right on the basis that: (i) they are champions of contemporary capitalism (albeit this may take a variety of form), (ii) generally anti-socialist, (iii) have disdain for basic democratic institutions especially human rights (human rights values, laws, policies, institutions and activists), (iv) tendency towards militarism, and (v) are xenophobic or racist, and many are misogynistic. Le Pen is rightwing, but her rightwing-ness that is different from Modi’s; Modi’s is a different brand from Trump’s; Duterte maybe have some left-wing rhetorical posturing, but his emerging political-economic policies veer towards the right (Bello [2018] calls him an ‘original fascist’), and so as Putin’s populist politics. Actually existing populists will not have a perfect fit in the term ‘right-wing populism’, but they have no better fit in other terms floated around either, such as ‘authoritarian populism’ or ‘populist authoritarianism’. Most of these populist currents have strong tendency towards authoritarianism, but again, it is a matter of degree: Putin’s authoritarianism may be different in degree, extent and form compared to Erdogan’s or Trump’s. There will always be a lot of exceptions once we deploy a defining term. And resorting to using just the plain term, ‘populism’ loses the distinct character of the political moment, which is partly marked by some kind of ‘rightwing-ness’ and ‘authoritarianism’, at least to varying degrees and tendencies and in varying manifestations. Finally, this term dovetails with our discussion of a potential counter-current, namely, a reformulated ‘left-wing populism’. It will set and clarify the basis of the fundamental differences between what is a right-wing and left-wing populism, and why such clarity is important. It will help illustrate the absurdity of some casual commentaries putting USA’s Trump and Venezuela’s Maduro in one basket, for instance. Yet, it will also illustrate how the term ‘left-wing

¹ As discussed elsewhere in the paper, including the part that touches on the American agrarian populism and in the 1981 table by Canovan, there are various forms and traditions that do not directly speak to the debates that are directly linked to the late 19th century Russian agrarian populism; debates that are directly speaking to Marxism. The populism of Lazaro Cardenas in the 1930s in Mexico that, in turn, built on the earlier agrarian radicalism by Emilio Zapata, is an example that leans towards left politics. Another example is Ramon Magsaysay in the Philippines who, like Cardenas, championed the issue of giving land to poor peasants, albeit more conservative, and his program was more of a resettlement of peasants to frontier areas, or an ‘internal colonization’, so to speak, than a proper land reform, and was an anti-communist, and is widely believed to be supported by the CIA. But we will not go into an exhaustive listing of these various types of populism. The Russian agrarian populism as an illustration and mapping of debated concepts is sufficient for the purpose of this paper.

populism' also suffers a similar semantic problem, e.g. Bolivia's Morales is a left-wing populist, but, arguably, employs some capital accumulation strategies with features that are more to be expected from a right-wing regime than a left-wing regime, e.g. neoliberal (neo)extractivism (McKay and Colque 2016, McKay 2017). Finally, the terms 'right-wing' and 'left-wing populisms' are used here like 'bookends', i.e. ideal-types, meaning as heuristic tools. In reality, rarely will any populist current fit perfectly in either ideal-types. The 'bookends' will allow us to see a dynamic continuum rather than fixed categories in between, where we see populist currents and regimes consolidate features of either of the ideal-types and regularly borrow features from the opposite side. We will see a constantly fluid situation where populists straddle across various points between these bookends, constantly morphing into something less of an ideal-type. This is an important feature of populism today, and such concrete condition renders the term 'right-wing' or 'left-wing' populism imperfect and imprecise but useful.

There is a significant difference in the treatment of the concept of populism in this paper from the treatment in the classic debates in agrarian populism (discussed elaborately further below). In this paper, I use the term 'populism' to mean *the deliberate political act of aggregating disparate and even competing and contradictory class and group interests and demands into a relatively homogenized voice, i.e. 'us, the people', against an 'adversarial them' for tactical or strategic political purposes.* This framing of the concept will allow for engaging directly with the issue of how agrarian populists overlap and interact with right-wing populism. It might well be that by looking at the dynamics between agrarian populism and right-wing populism that an unintended by-product can be realized, i.e. to make fresh contribution to the classic debates on agrarian populism. But that is another matter.

In its attempt at homogenizing disparate, often competing interests of various classes and groups, each of the contemporary right-wing populists and progressive agrarian populists is marked and defined by internal *contradictions* and, at times, *antagonisms* (based on class relations, ideological positions, political calculations, among others) even while the two ideologically opposed populist groups target broadly similar issues and adversaries. Why and under what conditions do right-wing populist agitations emerge, and what is the relationship between these conditions and the emergence of agrarian populists? Do they co-emerge? If so, can the latter contribute to undermining the former? These questions are of particular interest to activists and academic researchers who seek to understand the role of the rural world in the rise of contemporary right-wing populism.² Rural populations have provided electoral and political support to right-wing populists, among others, Trump in the United States, Modi in India, Thaksin in Thailand, Erdogan in Turkey, and Duterte in the Philippines. Scoones et al. (2018a) offer a closer, if preliminary, look at the possible connection between 'authoritarian populism' and the rural world, trying to frame new ways of asking questions in order to understand such a relationship. This essay builds on Scoones et al. (2018a) that explores the rise of authoritarian populism and the rural world. Despite big claims that the world is now urban, the fact remains that nearly half the world's population, that is, more than 3 billion people, is rural. Rural political tendencies have become swing factors in many settings and political moments, including electoral politics and democratization more generally.³ Where rural voters are significant, if not the majority, the influence of rural issues on populist discourses and agitation is significant, and vice versa. We see this in Modi's slogans in India,⁴ or Thaksin's rhetoric and programs in Thailand. Furthermore, the issues that helped condition the rise of populism in one geographic region may originate or can be linked to a distant place: the rise of the populous and wealthier industrial belts in southeast China is linked to the massive rural-to-urban migration from other places in China, the phenomenon of the left-behind population in the countryside, and the widening gap between and rural and urban worlds that forced the national government to adopt a populist program, the New Socialist

² Brass (1997) offers a critical examination of the relationship between the 'new' right and what he clusters and labels as 'new' populism in the 1960s through the 1990s in which agrarian themes form, he argues, a common bond for the two. It speaks to the themes explored in the present paper, but with different categorizations of objects of analysis.

³ For the latter, see Jonathan Fox's edited volume on rural democratization with perspectives from Latin America and the Philippines.

⁴ See Vanaik (2018).

Countryside.⁵ The rise of these Chinese industrial belts in turn is linked to the decay of many rural and urban communities in the US that used to host factories, many of which shut down as capital migrated to southeastern China, among other destinations. Thus, the populist impulses in multiple settings - rural China, urban/industrial China and de-industrialized, abandoned and neglected rural and urban communities in the US - are concretely linked. It is not surprising that despite the differences between them, right-wing populists worldwide are increasingly supporting or encouraging each other. This has prompted Edelman to raise a question that needs serious reflection: “To what extent are the world’s autocrats – Trump, Duterte, Erdoğan, Modi, Orbán, Putin, among others – simply a mutually reinforcing collection of erratic rulers? Or are they taking shape as a *global authoritarian populist axis*?” (Edelman 2018: 1, emphasis added). And all these have resurrected the issue of agrarian populism in broad new ways, requiring us to revisit and critically examine it against varying contemporary populisms, especially right-wing populism.

In this paper, we will engage with agrarian movement, but it is taken in a broader sense to mean that it is in itself a food sovereignty movement. The latter tends to be broader than conventional agrarian movement in terms of social base and agenda. Moreover, food sovereignty is understood here in three ways: as a *critique* of the global food system and its role in capitalism, as a notion of an *alternative* within and/or to capitalism, and as a *movement* that aggregates multiple and complementary critiques and constructs alternatives. While food sovereignty is *not* strictly an agrarian critique, alternative, and movement, there are elements in its provenance, social base and political inspiration that are *fundamentally agrarian*. Relevant conceptual background discussions to this particular take on food sovereignty include Shattuck et al. (2015), Alonso-Fradejas et al. (2015), Edelman et al. (2014), and Wittman et al. (2010).

The awkward parallelism, resemblances and interconnections between right-wing populism and agrarian movements are *not* random accidents. The political economy upon which such populisms emerged partly shapes the kind of broader politics that get constructed. The boundaries between right-wing populist currents and their social base in the countryside on the one hand, and the populism of agrarian movements are constantly porous, blurring and malleable. This means partly that there is a slippery slope for the populism of progressive agrarian movements to reinforce rather than undermine right-wing populism. The challenge is how to reclaim populism without its authoritarian trappings on the one hand, or its romantic restorative tendencies on the other hand. A notion of ‘class-conscious left-wing populism’ – that is anti-capitalist and socialist in perspective – in which agrarian movements play an important role, is put forward as a possible contribution to the struggle against the contemporary global right-wing populist upsurge and to building positive alternatives. In this context, it is critical to take up the (unexpected) proposition put forward by a leading skeptic of contemporary agrarian movements and food sovereignty, Henry Bernstein, to go ‘beyond the comfort zone of class purism’ and not to dismiss today’s agrarian populism. Revisiting the Russian revolution, Bernstein (2018: 21-22, original emphasis) noted the challenge for adherents of Marxist political economy whose strength is in socioeconomic analysis to have a better grasp of agrarian politics. He said:

The route from the former to the latter entails many additional determinations and complexities, as well as capacity to confront the contingent, the indeterminate and unanticipated, and to change positions, that goes far beyond the comfort zone of class purism and other illusions [...] This points towards a paradox... namely that while the best of Marxism retains its analytical superiority in addressing the class dynamics of agrarian change, for a variety of reasons agrarian populism appears a more vital ideological and political force. In my view, the challenges facing any Marxist agrarian politics would be helped by critical engagement with the most progressive (anti-capitalist) of today’s agrarian populism, and the diverse rural struggles it embraces, rather than dismissing a priori all agrarian populism as necessarily and equally ‘wrong’ and ‘reactionary’.

⁵ See Ye, et al. (2013).

The rest of this essay consists of initial notes of uneven length on the possible links between right-wing populism and agrarian populism, why these are critical to investigate and understand further, and some of the ways we can further research these questions. More generally, the aim is to better understand the links between right-wing populism and the rural world because while there are good indications that the contemporary right-wing upsurge has substantial support from the countryside, current efforts at understanding and fighting right-wing populism tend to be less pursued compared to urban-centric and big national politics oriented discussions. In a way, the effort in this paper, and that in Scoones et al. (2018a), resonates with the earlier argument by Paxton to study the 1920s and 1930s French countryside in an attempt to understand fascism in France. Paxton (1997: 6) lamented: “[I]t was in the countryside that both Mussolini and Hitler won their first mass following, and it was angry farmers who provided their first mass constituency. Yet, so far, every student of fascism in France has ignored the countryside.” He concluded: “Given the salience of angry farmers in the success of fascism elsewhere and the importance of the peasantry in the French society, that is a crippling omission.” We do not want to commit the same omission in the current global context. Despite the much lower proportion of farmers in so-called developed societies, and even in so-called developing societies, their absolute numbers and often their political weight remain significant. Vanaik (2018:1) makes a compelling appeal on why studying the rural and mobilizing at the rural front are strategic. In light of the rise of the Sangh in India, with its ideology of *Hindutva* or Hindu nationalism (with its hatred of Muslims and Islam) Vanaik believes that subverting communalism requires struggling at all fronts: cultural, political, ideological and economic, concluding that: “it is the economic front, *especially in the agrarian sector*, which is currently the Sangh’s weak spot” (ibid. emphasis added).

2. Preliminary notes and starting points

On ‘populism’

The concept of ‘populism’ is highly contested. In this essay, populism is treated primarily as a political action by particular social groups that unites otherwise disparate social class and group interests and demands in a relatively coherent voice or force, that is, ‘the people’⁶ — against a constructed ‘other’, often ‘the elite’. What we are keen to examine, following Rancière (2016: 102), are the “diverse or even antagonistic figures of the people, figures constructed by privileging modes of assembling certain distinctive traits, certain capacities or incapacities: an ethnic people defined by the community of land or blood; [...] an ignorant people that the oligarchs keep at a distance.” Rancière elaborates that the “notion of populism itself constructs a people characterized by the formidable alloy of a capacity – the brute force of great number – and an incapacity – the ignorance attributed to that same great number.” It connects with Laclau’s unit of analysis which is “not to be the *group*, as a referent, but the socio-political *demand*” (Laclau 2005a: 224) of particular groups (which is understood in this paper as social classes and groups). It is in this political process that *a section* of the community/people gets projected as ‘the people’, and the people is reduced to mean that particular section (ibid: 214). Thus, Trump’s mass base is invoked by Trump as ‘the American people’, and the American people is reduced to pertain to that particular mass base of Trump.

With these basic concepts as reference points, there are eight fundamental assumptions about populism discussed (with uneven length) in this essay, namely, (i) a matter of degree, (ii) ‘politics of appearances’, (iii) a matter of variation, (iv) oscillating between rhetoric and reality, (v) differentiated and layered in its composition, (vi) politically volatile and capricious (vii) transcending ideology, or claiming to, and (viii) relevant either way: in or out of state power.

First, populism is not an ‘either/or’ question; rather, it is *a matter of degree*. It is better understood not in black and white, but in shades of grey, as we compare, for instance, the varying strands and degrees of populism, and tendencies towards militarism, authoritarianism or democratization of Zimbabwe’s Mugabe, Thailand’s Thaksin, Philippines’ Duterte, Cambodia’s Hun Sen, Myanmar’s Aung San Suu Kyi, India’s Modi, USA’s Trump, France’s Le Pen, Turkey’s Erdogan, Russia’s Putin, Venezuela’s

⁶ The term ‘people’ alone merits an entire essay, as it has become far more contested in the contemporary era marked by populist upsurge. For a useful overview, see Badiou (2016) and Canovan (2005).

Chávez, Bolivia's Morales, Ecuador's Correa, or Brazil's Lula. As Laclau (2005a: 45, original emphasis) puts it: "To ask oneself if a movement *is* or *is not* populist, is actually, to start with a wrong question. The question that we should, instead, ask ourselves, is the following: *to what extent* is a movement populist?" This is based on the assumption that all types of politics take on some kind of homogenizing task in order to amplify a unified voice of the represented. The logic of this argument is derived from some of the key tasks of political actions to homogenize diverse interests (complementary, competing, or contradictory) of social groups and their political positions into a singular stand or voice, aimed at achieving greater salience partly by blurring if not erasing the sharp contradictions and differences between social groups and classes, highlighting only few unified features that are usually deliberately distorted if not largely imagined. Often invoked is a homogeneous 'people', which is further distilled into the populist leader's name as the short-cut icon, e.g. 'Trump' (against the 'Washington swamp'). The construction of a 'populist' project, whether rhetorical or real, is messy and uneven across time and space.

Second, to a large extent, populism is about '*politics of appearances*'. Right-wing populist agitation builds on a 'spectacle' to generate 'political investors' on the strength of a promise for rewards or benefits. What is being suggested here is that right-wing populist agitation has parallelism with Anna Tsing's notion of 'economy of appearances', i.e. "the self-conscious making of a spectacle [that] is a necessary aid to gathering investment funds [...] It is a regular feature of the search for financial capital" (Tsing 2000: 118). She elaborates: "In speculative enterprises, profit must be imagined before it can be extracted; the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors. The more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible an investment frenzy" (ibid.). Tsing (2000: 141-42) advances the notion of 'spectacular accumulation' which "occurs when investors speculate on a product that may or may not exist. Investors are looking for the appearance of success. They cannot afford to find out if the product is solid; by then their chances for profit will be gone [...]" (ibid.). She concludes that, "real estate development requires an assessment of desirability and growth, not demonstrated occupancy; it sells investors attractiveness" (ibid.).

In a lot of ways, right-wing populist agitation has a similar logic and operates in a similar fashion as Tsing's 'economy of appearances'. Perhaps one huge difference is that the conjuring, spectacle and frenzy are even greater in the current right-wing populist agitation as compared to the local Indonesian gold rush Tsing was studying. We can call the right-wing populist political version of Tsing's 'economy of appearances' the *politics of appearances*. Building on Tsing (2000: 118), we can say that 'politics of appearances' is the self-conscious making of a spectacle that is a necessary mechanism in gathering political support. The possibility of political performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential voters, supporters and investors. The more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible a frenzy of political support. All right-wing populist agitations engage in spectacles, while their core group, supporters and sympathizers are investing political support because of their speculation for rewards or benefits in the form of social reforms or for rent-seeking opportunities. Overall, with the spectacle and frenzy, one can feel that big things are being said and claimed, but a closer inspection of the concrete situation reveals that there is a huge gap between what is being conjured or promised and what is delivered.⁷ The notion of 'politics of appearances' can very well apply to the politics of agrarian movement building, agitation and mobilization. This will not, however, be elaborated in this present paper.

Third, there are *varied types of populism* in relationship to democracy and authoritarianism. There are right-wing and left-wing authoritarian populisms, and in between them lies a diversity of possible combinations. Authoritarianism, seen as a dynamic political process, is inherently uneven and replete with contradictions, and it is hardly the case that a regime is ever completely democratic or totally

⁷ Others use the term 'fantasy' to advance a related argument. Examining the war on drugs by Duterte that has claimed close to 15,000 lives of mostly poor Filipino people, Curato (2017: 17, emphasis original) explains that, "it has gained traction locally for it offers a compelling *fantasy*: a vision of national development where fighting criminality is a prerequisite for prosperity." It is a 'fantasy' in the sense that killing drug dealers and users will not fundamentally address the economic marginalization that ultimately causes addiction and dealing.

authoritarian. Populist currents malign the institutional establishment with pejorative labels such as ‘corrupt politicians’ and ‘establishment insiders’ for very tactical reasons and in very tactical moments. They eschew or try to subvert conventional institutional links with the represented people and the institutionalized rules that govern interaction between representatives and the represented – at least selectively and tactically. On the flipside, populist projects are not always and necessarily averse to or incompatible with liberal democracy. Furthermore, it is not only that it is multiple, populisms of competing variants do co-exist and clash head-on at the same time in the same political-administrative territory: Trump versus Sanders in the US in 2016, and Le Pen versus Melenchon in France in 2017 are examples.

It is within this wide-ranging terrain, and following Scoones et al. (2018a) that we can examine more closely notions like ‘authoritarian populism’ (Hall 1985). Given the variation, some kind of typology is useful. The most referred to typology is the one by Canovan in 1981.⁸ The purpose of presenting table 1 here is limited to show a range of populisms (with different bases of categorizing populisms compared to the one done by Terence J. Byres on agrarian populism that is discussed further below), especially the two broad clusters of ‘agrarian populism’ and ‘political populism’.

Table 1. Canovan’s typology of populism

Agrarian populisms	
1	Farmers’ radicalism (eg the US People’s Party)
2	Peasant movements (eg The Eastern European Green Rising)
3	Intellectual agrarian socialism (eg the <i>narodniki</i>)
Political populisms	
4	Populist dictatorship (eg Peron)
5	Populist democracy (ie calls for referendums and ‘participation’)
6	Reactionary populisms (eg George Wallace and his followers)
7	Politicians populism (i.e. broad non-ideological coalition-building that draws on the unificatory appeal of ‘the people’)

Fourth, populism inherently *oscillates between rhetoric and reality*, that is, ‘populism in word’ and ‘populism in deed’. Many of the neo-extractivist left-wing regimes in the Latin American ‘pink tide’ governments veered towards ‘populism in deed’, at least partially. One of the defining features of these regimes is to continue to expand the extractivist character of neoliberal capitalism but they have introduced, to varying extent, redistributive social reforms, including cash transfer schemes and food distribution programs carried out by the ‘pink tide’ governments under Lula and Dilma in Brazil, Morales in Bolivia, and Correa in Ecuador – at times under creative populist banners such as ‘buen vivir’, or indeed, ‘food sovereignty’ (see Arsel et al. 2016, Gudynas 2011, Veltmeyer and Petras 2014, Vergara-Camus and Kay 2017). For instance, under Chávez, Venezuela made significant gains on many social policy fronts including eradicating hunger prior to the 2014 collapse of oil prices. The populism of Mugabe resulted in real although partial land redistribution. How sturdy and internally consistent is the structural and institutional legacy of such left-wing populisms when and where they were carried out, at least partially, is an empirical question that needs careful investigation. This is especially because we see competing interpretations of the current situation of Venezuela’s food distribution program, Zimbabwe’s land reform, or indeed what is going to happen with the left-wing populist gains in light of the right-wing political manoeuvres that ousted Brazil’s Workers Party (PT) from power?⁹ Meanwhile, there are several right-wing populist groups that got into power on the promise of populist sweeping social reforms. However, there remains a huge gap between what was promised and what is delivered. Whether this will remain so is something to closely watch.

⁸ As cited in Laclau (2005b: 4).

⁹ For a recent collection on Latin America’s ‘pink tide’ governments from an agrarian perspective, see the special issue of *Journal of Agrarian Change* in 2017, edited by Leandro Vergara-Camus and Cristobal Kay. For Venezuela’s food politics, see Schiavoni (2017). For Zimbabwe’s land reform, Moyo (2011), Scoones et al. (2010).

Fifth, a populist current (right-wing populists or progressive agrarian movements) is *inherently internally differentiated and layered* in terms of actors and political tendencies. It is useful to see populist groups as something internally differentiated and layered: leaders, a core group, and a social base of supporters and sympathizers. Each set of actors has varying agendas, roles and commitment to the framing of the populist agenda and agitation, not necessarily unified, with each one trying to use the other. A core group is usually a mixture of strange sub-groups: ideologues committed to particular worldviews, oligarchs, various racists, and sub-layers of brokers, speculators, scammers, swindlers, and perhaps even circles of organized crime. The ordinary people's willingness to let populist leaders claim them, act in their name, speak on their behalf, and bundle them together as 'the people' (often rebundled in an even narrower manner as in just the name of the populist leader) is probably less about their belief in and commitment to the populist rhetoric or trust in the populist leader. It may mean only their distrust in the old establishment or traditional elitist system is so deep that they are quite relaxed in gambling on something unconventional.¹⁰ Moreover, a core group, or sub-groups within a core group do not emerge from nowhere. One reason for, and at the same time a by-product of, right-wing populist agitation is almost always the revival of moribund, or the expansion and mainstreaming of, fringe groups engaged in hate politics, such as white supremacists and other racist groups, and religious extremism whether of Islamic (Hadiz 2016), Hindu (Vanaik 2017), Christian, or Buddhist variants.

Sixth, each layer of actors within a populist group (leader, core group, sympathizers or supporters) is *politically volatile and capricious* in an ever-fluid situation, where the leadership, core group, and mass base may behave differently over time, often in self-contradictory manner. They can change their discourse all the time, as they are quite situational and tactical but at the same time strategic in their political calculation. Duterte in the Philippines is an example: engaging in left-wing rhetoric one day, then into right-wing the next two days, in anti-American slogans one day, then into cooperating with the American troops the next week, in power sharing with the communists one day, then into annihilating the communists the next day; although there are more or less strategically consistent themes like disdain for drug addicts (especially from among the poorer classes of society) and human rights, sexism, and deference to China.

Seventh, *populist politics transcends ideology, or claims to transcend ideology*.¹¹ Right-wing populism principally anchors itself in the promotion or defence of capitalism that puts the market at the center of everything, giving corporations the freedom to accumulate as much profit as they can without any serious regard to social equity and ecological balance and sustainability.¹² Right-wing populists do not always have neat, textbook features of rightwing-ness, as they straddle various types and features of populism. Nevertheless, one common feature among right-wing populists is to veer towards authoritarianism, as their way of reaffirming and reinforcing the fundamentals of capitalism. Moreover, to varying degrees and between rhetoric and reality, right-wing populists internalize and take action on fundamental issues confronting ordinary people (working class and the middle class) even while they principally protect and protect big corporate interests. Contemporary right-wing

¹⁰ In a way this is like the reverse of the 'moral economy of the peasant' (Scott 1976) where peasants are averse to radical and risky political change and are into 'safety first' mode. Meaning, the pre-existing patron-client relations may not be the best setup for them but their subsistence rights are secured in that relationship. And for as long as the other options are less certain they would be better than what they have now, they will be averse to challenging existing political order. In the current context, what the people have now (or the immediate past establishment) is so bad that people developed extreme 'aversion to business as usual' and are ready to take the risk of throwing support to something new, perhaps calculating that nothing could be worse than what they have now.

¹¹ Contemporary left-wing populism will not be discussed in this essay in any significant extent because it deserves deeper and more systematic stand-alone treatment, something that cannot be explored with justice in this short essay. Of particular interest related to the current essay is the Latin America's 'pink tide' and its recent and present fate and possible future. See Vergara-Camus and Kay (2017) for a relevant and excellent overview.

¹² This is not to say that there are no right-wing populist strands that are anti-capitalist but at the same time are into 'national socialism'. The revival of some neo-Nazi groups in Europe is relatively significant. But in general, the contemporary right-wing populists are not in this particular type.

populists — Le Pen, Trump, Modi, Duterte, Wilders, Danish People's Party, among others — demonstrate this clearly. Notable for instance are working class issues that made their way on to the electoral platforms of right-wing populist leaders. In a provocative (and perhaps contentious analysis or political stand) James Petras (2018: 1) noted, "Le Pen addresses the fundamental interests of the vast majority of French workers, farmers, public employees, unemployed and underemployed youth and older workers approaching retirement." Yet, it is important to look into the fundamental character of a populist current. Duterte's economic policies, for example, despite populist agitations and rhetoric, are fundamentally in defending and promoting capitalism.

Eighth, a populist group is *relevant either way: in or out of state power*. The right-wing agitation that we are interested in is either in or out of state power. Regardless, their significance stands. Marine Le Pen's politics is just as important to be taken seriously as Trump's despite the former being out of state power, while the latter is in state power. Their location vis-à-vis state power has influence on most of the several assumptions we discussed above, e.g. how they frame their discourse, forge alliances, and so on. Right-wing populist groups that are outside state power, such as the contemporary Islamic right-wing populist agitation in Indonesia, should not be dismissed or taken for granted because they can actually significantly influence the character and trajectory of state power. The emergence of the parties similar to Wilders' and the like in Europe, even if the centre, conservative or liberal parties promise never to include them in a coalition, has forced the latter parties to adopt some of the right-wing populists' rhetoric and policies, to catch votes. Some groups long considered to be fringe groupings and politically irrelevant and unpopular could, in a sudden change in political conjuncture, reinsert themselves into a more significant and broader right-wing populist current, such as the white supremacists and alt-right in the United States.

Right-wing populism seen from 'inside-outside the state' perspective is better seen as a continuum, and from a long historical perspective. History here is not to be mistakenly seen as the study of the past. Bloch offers a critical guide: "Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present" (Bloch 1954: 36). Indeed, understanding Trump's right-wing populism and the progressive populism of La Via Campesina and its US affiliates requires us to understand the long history and moments and instances in different historical conditions of American populist agitations.¹³ If we take an ahistorical a look of the snapshot of the current hunger and malnutrition in Venezuela, we would be quick to blame the left-wing populism of Chavismo, exacerbated by the present leadership of Maduro. But such an analysis leaves out key nodes in history of how Venezuela got to this point, including the fact that between 1999 and 2013, the United Nations and FAO – and many left-wing intellectuals worldwide who now distance themselves from Chavismo – were full of praises and celebration of the stunning accomplishment of the Bolivarian revolution in eliminating hunger and malnutrition, a big accomplishment thinking that just a decade earlier, in 1989, people engaged in bloody food riots where dozens were killed and hundreds wounded in what is

¹³ Notable moments include 1877, with the founding of the Texas Alliance (and similar others in Illinois, the Dakotas, Minnesota and Kansas) that evolved into the populist Farmers' Alliance, culminating in the so-called Omaha Platform in 1892 (Taggart 2000: 32-33, Hobsbawm, 1987: 36). The Omaha Platform "called for land as the source of wealth and the heritage of the people, to be free of speculation and of foreign investment and demanded all land owned by railroads and other corporations 'in excess of their actual needs' should revert to the government and be held for settlers" (Taggart 2000: 34). To a large part, it reads like a manifesto by La Via Campesina – except for the explicit framing of the settlers as 'the people' (and the people has been reduced to mean the settlers), which means legitimizing the dispossession of indigenous peoples whether in the United States, Canada or the rest of the world. Between 1892 and today, there has been a long, dynamic history of American populist agitation of various types, including George Wallace's right-wing populism in the middle of the 1960s civil rights movement. Chrisman (2016) rightly goes as far back as the Reagan era in explaining the 2016 rural American votes, but we see it could be stretched farther back in history. Or, indeed, any attempt at having a fuller understanding of the current coal mining issues and Trump support in and on the outskirts of the Appalachia can only be successful by understanding the past to include the anatomy of power and powerlessness in this region of the United States, as examined by John Gaventa in his 1982 classic book (Gaventa 1982).

popularly referred to as ‘Caracazo’. If we follow Bloch’s historical method in our analysis, then we will be able to locate more appropriately the roles of left-wing populist policies and the current right-wing opposition (and their lineages) across political moments, at the very least from the 1989 Caracazo to the 2018 deep food and social crisis – as well as the role of agriculture and countryside (Lander and Fierro 1996, Lander 2014, Schiavoni 2017). The key point here is that a messy, recursive reading of the present *and* the past in order to plan for future political actions is key in understanding and confronting contemporary right-wing populism and building a positive future, and in understanding the possible role of the rural world in that process.

On agrarian populism

In critical agrarian studies, populism has a broadly similar meaning as discussed so far. The immediate provenance of contemporary agrarian populism is the left-wing Russian *narodniks* during the second half of the 19th century that aimed to overthrow tsarist rule and to rescue the surviving Russian peasant communes (*obshchina*) and their organizational structure (*mir*) that they believe can constitute the seed for a possible socialist future. *Narodnism* (‘*narod*’ broadly means ‘people’) was a ‘restorative struggle’ with a tendency to romanticize communities where capitalist relations have not fully taken over yet. Thus, the peasantry was seen as the route to socialism without having to pass through the capitalist phase of development. One of the key inspirations for the *narodniks* was Alexander Herzen, who was disillusioned by the lack of a revolution in 1848, left Russia and lived in London. The main ideological themes he developed for Russia included: distrust of liberal democracy, suspicion of abstractions, faith in the Russian peasant, and belief in the need for a dedicated group of revolutionaries (Taggart 2000: 49). For the intellectuals, the practical usefulness of the organization of the *obshchina* (i.e. *mir*) was a major attraction. But they also believed that the Russian peasantry remained “uncorrupted by modern capitalist and Western development... The purity of the peasantry was a reflection of their ‘innocence’ and their untaintedness” (ibid. 50). This perspective would stand in direct opposition to the Leninist interpretation of Marx, where Lenin saw a socially differentiating Russian peasantry amidst capitalist penetration of the countryside, and the development of the productive forces as necessary stages towards capitalism and socialism, thereby viewing capitalism in both its destructive and creative sides (Lenin 2004 [original 1905]).

It was estimated that about 2,000 to 3,000 urban intellectuals went to the Russian countryside in 1874, with a certain degree of spontaneity, without any written program or organization. These young intellectuals did not know much about peasant life and the practicality of political work. “Moving from village to village, they distributed revolutionary pamphlets and talked indiscriminately to the peasants who crossed their path about the need to radically redistribute land and engage in revolution” (Taggart 2000: 50). The *narodniks* would soon be frustrated by what they would discover about peasants’ politics: the peasantry did not have the appetite for revolution. The urban intellectuals imagined and expected peasants “to be oppressed, idealistic and ripe for revolution. In practice they found the peasants to be acquisitive, conservative and profoundly suspicious of the students” (ibid.: 52). Perhaps even more troubling for the *narodniks* was their realization of how deep the loyalty of the Russian peasants was towards the tsar. Many of these peasants would tip the authorities about the presence of the *narodniks*. By 1877, most of the students, about 1,611, had been arrested. Taggart (2000: 52) made a powerful summary of the 1874 event: “The summer of 1874 showed what a group of activists could do. More than that, it showed what the peasantry would not do” (ibid.). The *narodniks* shifted strategy from educating the peasantry to engaging in armed struggle, mainly assassination attempts at the tsarist authorities, especially the tsar, some successful, mostly not. Two waves of organizational grouping came about, ‘Land and Freedom’ (*Zemlya i Volya*) and the ‘People’s Will’ (*Narodnaya Volya*), the latter successfully assassinated the tsar (Alexander II, in 1881). But quickly afterwards, amid arrests, convictions and executions, the People’s Will was broken (Taggart 2000: 54).

The intellectuals in the People’s Will got into direct contact with Marx, and they read *Capital* and adhered to most of its basic tenets. Zasulich wrote to Marx: “[W]e often hear it said that the rural commune is an archaic form condemned to perish by history, scientific socialism and, in short,

everything above debate. Those who preach such a view call themselves your disciples *par excellence*: ‘Marksists’.” She continued: “Their strongest argument is often: ‘Marx said so.’ You would be doing us a very great favour if you were to set forth Your ideas on the possible fate of our rural commune, and on the theory that it is historically necessary for every country in the world to pass through all the phases of capitalist production” (Zasulich 1983: 98-99 [original 16 February 1881], original emphasis). To which Marx responded, after several lengthy draft versions of his reply: “The analysis in *Capital*... provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian commune. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia” (Marx 1983: 124 [original 8 March 1881]). The exchange between Zasulich and Marx was the subject of much controversy and debate in the literature of Marxist agrarian studies.

Teodor Shanin put together these documents and assembled reflection papers based on these (Shanin 1983a). Going through the various drafts of Marx’s reply to Zasulich, Shanin (1983b) summarized some of what he thought were among the most significant elements in Marx’s drafts, concluding that: “To Marx... a timely revolutionary victory could turn the Russian commune into a major ‘vehicle of social regeneration.’ A ‘direct starting point of the system to which the contemporary society strives’ and a grass root framework for large-scale co-operative labour and the use of ‘modern machinery’” and added: “[T]o understand it all ‘one must descend from pure theory to Russian reality’.”

While the original Russian populism was short-lived, its legacy and influence would continue on, partly because of the key elements it brought forward, namely, its principal commitment to socialism, albeit trying to take the route via the peasantry. As Hobsbawm (1977: 199, cited in Bernstein 2018: 5-6) puts it, *narodnism* “is not significant for what it achieved, which was hardly anything, nor for the numbers it mobilised, which hardly exceeded a few thousand...[but that it]... formed, as it were, the chemical laboratory in which all the major revolutionary ideas of the nineteenth century were tested, combined and developed into those of the twentieth century.” This would make them inextricably linked to subsequent Russian revolutionary ideas and practice, from Leninism onwards, to contemporary Marxism for that matter, and to the Chayanovian socio-economic logic of the peasant economy.¹⁴ *Narodnism*, decimated after 1881, reincarnated “in the form of a ‘Social Revolutionary’ party in the early 1900s,” and it would “become the major rural party of the left...” (Hobsbawm 1987: 295). For Shanin (1983c: 271):

The crux of the originality and illumination of the Russian revolutionary populist lies... in the posing of a number of fundamental questions concerning capitalist society, its ‘peripheries’ and the socialist project. The attempts to disqualify those questions as belonging to the past only, i.e.

¹⁴ Later, around the 1920s, Alexander Chayanov would develop his theory on peasant economy, based largely on his reading of socioeconomic dynamics of the peasant household (Chayanov 1966 [orig. 1925]). Chayanov’s theories of the peasant economy would later become a key influence in subsequent agrarian (neo)populist discourse and among towering agrarian scholars such as Teodor Shanin, James C. Scott and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (see, Shanin 1972, Scott 1976, van der Ploeg 2013). The competing interpretations of the Russian peasantry offered by Lenin and Chayanov (and later, and more fundamentally between the Stalinist and Chayanovian views on agriculture) would frame subsequent debates on the agrarian question historically worldwide. Among the relatively recent recent treatments of the agrarian question that engage the Lenin-Chayanov debate include: Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2010a, 2010b), Bernstein (2009), Bernstein (forthcoming), Moyo et al. (2013), van der Ploeg (2018) and White (2018a, 2018b). Shanin’s view is that it is fundamentally more the Stalinist-Chayanovian, than the Leninist-Chayanovian opposing views that were deeply problematic, as he argues that Lenin’s views on the peasantry was in fact evolving especially in his later years. In part he implies that there is likely to be some misconceptions about Lenin’s view of the peasantry and part of the problem is conflating Leninist and Stalinist ideas (Teodor Shanin, personally communication 25 February 2018). Moreover, to what extent do the original *narodnism* and Chayanov have informed contemporary agrarian populism is something that, in my view, is generally assumed or theoretically extrapolated rather than demonstrated. This is relevant to ask especially because most of the important agrarian movements do not actually make explicit the theoretical provenance of their political frameworks, and the few that do make explicit their theoretical inspirations actually invoke Marx -- and never Herzen, Chernyshevskii or Chayanov, as in the case of Brazil’s MST.

representing the Russian social backwardness in the 1880s or the petty bourgeoisie nature of its peasantry, have proved wrong by historical experience. The decline of peasant Russia did not make those questions disappear; quite on the contrary, most of them became increasingly global and pertinent also in super-industrial environments. Such questions left unanswered come back to haunt socialists time and time again, and will proceed to do so until faced, theoretically and politically. They can be avoided only at socialism's peril.

Before closing the issue of Russian populism in this particular section, it is important to clarify a central point: how did the politically loaded term 'populism' originate, evolve and come to have such a negative meaning in the Marxist academic and political tradition? In the history of some communist parties, '(neo)populism' or '(neo)populist tendency' was viewed from a 'revolutionary-counterrevolutionary' ('R-CR') framework that in turn could, and did, lead to factional purges, a position that is definitely influenced by the Stalinist interpretation of Marx and Lenin. We turn to Shanin once again for his interpretation of the history of this term that is so central for the purpose of the current paper. In the specific context of Marxism and the *narodniks*, he explained (Shanin 1983b: 8) as follows, and we will see that the history of this term was intertwined with right-wing populism:

The label 'populist', like that of 'marxist', is badly lacking in precision; the heterogeneity of both camps was considerable. In Russian speech a populist (*narodnik*) could have meant anything from a revolutionary terrorist to a philanthropic squire. What makes it worse is the fact that there are today no political heirs to claim and defend the heritage of Russian populism – political losers have few loyal kinsmen, while the victors monopolise press, cash and imagination. Lenin's major work [*The Development of Capitalism in Russia*], from which generations of socialists learned their Russian terminology, used 'populism' as a label for a couple of writers who stood at that time on the extreme right wing of the populists... This made Lenin's anti-populist argument of 1898 easier, while increasing the obscurity of the populist creed to his readers of today.

Agrarian populism is plural and diverse, as the debates themselves would demonstrate. Terence J. Byres in his 1979 classic critique of the populism of Michael Lipton (1977) identified three types of agrarian populism: classical populism, neo-populism, and liberal populism (Byres 1979). He would later, in 2004, advance the notion of 'neoclassical neo-populism' to categorize the body of work of Griffin, Khan and Ickowitz (2002) (and Lipton).¹⁵ Neo-populism is essentially identified with Chayanov (1966 [original 1925]) that is supposed to be marked by continuity and change from classical populism. Following Byres's categories, it is rather easy to conclude that much of the contemporary agrarian movements associated with La Via Campesina do not fit the liberal and neoclassical neo-populist types; these types capture more the IFAP/WFO grouping, as discussed further below. It becomes complicated and contentious when we examine contemporary agrarian movements and food sovereignty movements from the lens of classical populism and neo-populism. Byres's bases for each category can be found in many of the progressive agrarian movements today.

¹⁵ In a classic 1979 critique of Lipton, Byres argued that Lipton embraces classical populism in as much as he has "an almost mystical faith in the mass of the people (who happen to be rural-'countryfolk') – not some of the people, but all of them who are capable... of uniting against their urban oppressors and establishing egalitarian Utopia" (Byres 1979: 238, original emphasis). He continued to elaborate that Lipton is a classical populist because of his belief that "the small farmer is more efficient... than the large... a distaste for industry and a conviction that industrialisation... is undesirable; an anti-capitalist stance; a determination to confront and reject Marxism, allied to a curious fascination with Marxist ideas..." Byres argued that Lipton is a neo-populist because of his "defence... of rich peasants... in his claim that he actually accepts the need for industrialisation, but in the distant future, and not if an efficient agriculture is possible; and in his aversion to revolution." Byres (2004) tagged Chayanov (1966 [original 1925]) as the father of neo-populism. Finally, Byres argued that Lipton is a liberal populist because of his "aversion to revolution" and "with its accompanying professed faith in reformist solutions and in the power of reason and argument to secure social justice (even from dictators)" (ibid.). Twenty-five years later, Byres (2004) criticized the work of Griffin, Khan and Ickowitz or 'GKI' (2002) on land reform, implicating Lipton, and put forward an argument that GKI and Lipton are in fact 'neo-classical neo-populist,' with their fundamentals actually anchored in neoclassical economics.

The Leninist/Stalinist-classical/neo-populist debate remains open, in my view (see latest important installments: White 2018a, van der Ploeg 2018, 2013; Bernstein 2009, 2018).

The reason for bringing in Byres' categories is limited to the purpose of emphasizing the plurality and diversity of actually existing agrarian populisms, where even Byres' categories of 'classical populism' and 'neo-populism' are each highly differentiated in reality. Bernstein's (2018: 21 22) emphasis on not dismissing 'a priori' agrarian populists is, partly and importantly, a *methodological* question that suggests a call for concrete analysis of concrete condition. Heeding this call, and taking a closer look at contemporary agrarian movements, we will see highly differentiated national and transnational agrarian movements based on class, ideology and politics. However, there is a tendency in the debates to see and label them as a unified and homogeneous movement. They are not. The various social classes and groups that comprise this lumped-together category of 'agrarian (neo)populism' – and the movements that compete to (re)present these, separately and collectively – are linked through class relations, and their internal politics are, at times, marked by antagonistic relations. The breadth and diversity get wider and more complex as these (sub)national movements link horizontally across classes and national borders, and unite vertically as they forge transnational coalitions. A basic class analysis of these national and transnational, sectoral and multisectoral agrarian movements would demonstrate highly differentiated movements based on class, ideology and politics, and other 'identifiers' (race, ethnicity, gender, generation) (Edelman and Borras 2016). It is therefore unfortunate that such movements, separately and together, are often lumped together, understood and labeled a priori as amorphous 'agrarian populist movements' – pejoratively – and are dismissed on these basis and as such. Sometimes it produces awkward pairing of theoretically rigorous ideas and shaky empirical basis. For example, there is not much debate about the fact that some Indian farmer's movements are movements of rich farmers or at least led by rich farmers, and are conservative even when they employ noisy agitation against urban and foreign corporations in the sense that they do not take up the fundamental class issues and demands of the rural landless working people around land and labour (Assadi 1994). But this conclusion specifically on these particular Indian movements cannot be extended to La Via Campesina as a whole, even when these Indian movements are key members of the transnational movement. Some of the key movements within La Via Campesina represent entirely different stories. Let us illustrate this point by looking at the three of the founding members of La Via Campesina, namely, Brazil's MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*) which is a broadly Marxist agrarian movement, Philippine Peasant Movement (KMP, *Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas*) which is within the close orbit of a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist left movement, and Andalucia's SOC (*Sindicato Obrero del Campo*) which comes from a broad anarcho-syndicalist tradition. All of which have explicit socialist perspectives, and all had played key leadership roles in La Via Campesina at various stages of the history of this transnational movement. These three movements *do not* have a perfect fit in the Leninist (or, more appropriately, Stalinist) formulation of a classical agrarian populist, or any of the subsequent formulation of 'neo-populism'; none of the three movements is conservative, reactionary or utopian; none of the three is class blind in their political work; none of these three organizations has similarity with the Indian rich peasant movements in terms of class base, ideology and politics. As far as I know, based on my long, sustained political work among agrarian movements, I would guess that the overwhelming majority of the movements affiliated with La Via Campesina veer towards, to varying degrees and extents, MST, KMP or SOC in terms of social base, ideology and politics than to the caricature of an agrarian populist, classical or neo. Interpretation and presentation by observers – allies, advocates, admirers, sympathizers of agrarian movements, whether academic researchers or NGOs – may not always be a precise reflection of what actually exists in agrarian communities or among these movements, and thus, these materials have to be treated always with great care. Raised from a different context, a closely relevant perspective is the important critical-but-sympathetic discussion by Tania Li (2014, 2015) on the question of indigenous peoples in a capitalist land frontier in Indonesia, and how movements or NGOs understood (or misunderstood) these communities, present and project them in the outside world, and (mis)inform their broader advocacy work.

And yet there are two other notable international farmer federations, namely, the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP, established in 1946 and self-liquidated in 2010), and

arguably, its reincarnation in the form of World Farmers Organization (WFO) (Desmarais 2007, Edelman and Borras 2016). These organizations are the movements of rich commercial farmers, or are politically led or influenced by the latter, are largely based in the Global North with a few members in the Global South that are movements of medium-scale and rich agricultural producers and farmers, such as Nicaragua's UNAG (*Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos*). Their sets of demands are fundamentally different from La Via Campesina's. Generally, they are defenders of capitalism, and opposed to socialism. They endorsed WTO, with minor reforms. Most of them can easily fit in Byres' categories of 'liberal populism' and/or 'neoclassical neo-populism'. It will be interesting and important to examine whether and how, and to map the extent to which, their mass base are linked to contemporary right-wing populism, and compare whether progressive agrarian populists behaved differently as compared to their conservative counterparts in interacting with or confronting right-wing populism.

The reason for going through this lengthy explanation above is to demonstrate that 'agrarian populism' is, in reality, far more differentiated than its homogenized and caricatured depiction. Deliberately lumping them together or failure to discern this differentiated nature can lead to a flawed deployment even of objectively rigorous theoretical ideas, and can lead to unfortunate or even disastrous political miscalculations in terms of practical politics, or worse, to dismiss such movements altogether. Thus, a critical starting point in this paper is that agrarian populism is diverse in terms of class, ideology and politics. Conservative rich peasant movements exist, but these are not included in the broader category that I use in this paper, namely, 'progressive agrarian populism/populists', the defining character of which, in the minimum, is being radically anti-capitalist. We now turn to take a glance at these movements.

Contemporary progressive agrarian movements are relatively vibrant. Their *political actions are populist* centrally because these are attempts at re-bundling socio-economically differentiated class and group interests and issues into a more homogenized voice: 'people of the land'. The rise of transnational agrarian movements (TAMs), particularly La Via Campesina, during the past couple of decades, and the subsequent platform for action, that is, food sovereignty¹⁶ are perhaps the most significant political processes in the social justice movement global front since neoliberalism kicked in and debilitated conventional workers' unions and movements in the early 1980s (Desmarais 2007, Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2011, Edelman and Borras 2016). La Via Campesina is, practically, a populist movement – based on our definition of the term (which is not necessarily pejorative). It is not that this brand of agrarian populism is necessarily and always class blind, as is often insinuated in debates. More generally, the assumption that *populism and class blindness necessarily and always go together* should be interrogated against the weight of concrete evidence. In my view, it is precisely the class-consciousness within some of these TAMs and food sovereignty movements (definitely La Via Campesina, or a large part of it at least) that has led them to aggregate disparate interests and demands among differentiated social classes and groups in deliberately framed multi-class political projects. It does not mean they were able to resolve the inherent contradictions or even antagonism in some of these social relationships, e.g. farmers and (migrant) farmworkers, and so on. It only means that these class dynamics are actually flagged, and being addressed even if unevenly within and between movements across societies and over time. This is a necessarily tension-filled and conflict-ridden *process*. Class-based politics is, like agrarian populism, diverse and plural. Rigid and sectarian interpretation of Marx (and arguably, Lenin) is one – but not the only possible type of class-based politics, as the contrasting approaches by Jeffrey Paige (1975) and Eric Wolf (1969) would show us, for instance.

The specific brand of progressive agrarian populism being pointed out above is different from iconic populist agrarian movements led by charismatic leaders and powerful orators and agitators such as Henry Dorgeres of the 1920s and 1930s French 'Greenshirts' movements, *caudillo*-led movements in

¹⁶ Food sovereignty is broadly defined as the right of peoples to produce, distribute and consume food in and near their territory in safe, healthy, culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways. For definitional and analytical survey of debates and debated concepts, see Shattuck et al. (2015) and Edelman et al. (2014).

the Latin American tradition, and some rich peasant movements in India from the 1980s onwards that were *deliberately class blinding* (opposing land reform, zero agenda on landless labourers, overly focused on productivist and remunerative issues and struggles, and so on). While reliance on charismatic leaders was common in agrarian populist movements, it is not necessarily always so. The agrarian populists in the USA (Farmers' Alliance, People's Party) were, according to Taggart (2000: 30) "a true mass movement. Compared with populist movements elsewhere in history, it is clear that the star of populism was not tied to the charismatic personalized leadership of one particular individual." Most of the current agrarian movements associated with progressive transnational agrarian movements (TAMs), especially La Via Campesina, at least generally speaking, have disdain for and actively work against conventional agrarian populism that was typical superstar-centric in their style of leadership and work. Many of these are true mass movements, as exemplified by multiple movement organizations, not just the well known Movement of Landless Workers or MST in Brazil (Pahnke et al. 2015, Wolford 2010). But as it happens to large mass movements, and for various reasons, there are some awkward and problematic alliances forged with problematic groupings, such as La Via Campesina and the rich peasant movements in India.

The point is that contemporary agrarian populism coincided with the latest episode of right-wing populist agitations, and it is not a random accident they emerged more or less at the same time and tackle similar issues, albeit in fundamentally competing fashion. It is not an accident that Canovan's 1981 typology of global populisms is split between a big politics populism and agrarian populism (see table 1).

Oppositions and the insurgent and anti-establishment nature of populism

Populist agitation is always antagonistic to an 'other'. The 'us' cannot be constructed without conjuring up a 'them'. But to the extent that the 'us' is defined or constructed, this is always framed as 'the anti-status quo', 'the anti-establishment', 'the subaltern', 'the underdog', 'the wronged', 'the violated', 'the looked-down', 'the pushed aside', 'the left-behind', or 'the challenger'.¹⁷ It revolves around an *insurgent* and subversive narrative and political action, often in a belligerent manner.

Right-wing and left-wing populists are two ideologically opposed groups targeting broadly similar issues and antagonists. Thus, even though each takes an adversarial and antagonistic stance against the other, their discourse and actions around shared elements of their anti-establishment narratives can actually be mutually reinforcing. Bernie Sanders' attack against 'the establishment' for having caused the closure of American factories was cast firmly within an anti-capitalism/neoliberalism frame, while Trump did the same except that the blame was not on capitalism/neoliberalism but on unpatriotic American corporations. Sanders and Trump similarly gained popularity in the US rust belt communities. It is thus not surprising that the social base of an insurgent right-wing populist group can sometimes also be the mass base of a challenger left-wing/progressive initiative, or at least the boundaries between them are porous, blurring or malleable. The overlapping mass bases are usually those who are *not* part of the ideological core of the right- and left-wing populist groups, and can constitute the 'swing vote' that can be lured from left-wing issues to right-wing populism. Again, the American rust belt politics during the 2016 national elections is a good example where traditionally Democratic states voted Trump when Sanders failed to become the Democratic Party presidential candidate.¹⁸ Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, for example, have ideological opposites for some of their core groups: 'alt-right' for Trump, socialists for Sanders, but they have common supporters and sympathizers, and the basis of the latter, at least in the beginning, is not their ideological stances, but the concrete issues addressed, such as factory closings amid corporate migration outside the country. These can be, and had been, made ideological later on.

Right-wing populist groups and anti-capitalist agrarian movements are both insurgent anti-establishment challengers, although they operate on different scales, with the former often in the spotlight of big politics. Transnational agrarian movements like La Via Campesina and food

¹⁷ See further elaboration by Panizza (2005).

¹⁸ For elaboration and insiders' accounts, see Sanders (2016) and Bond and Exley (2017).

sovereignty movements are populist movements in the sense discussed in this essay. Notably, they: (a) aggregate the interests of disparate social classes and groups, (b) push to homogenize discourses among their component groups and political currents, (c) project a common alternative future, in opposition to the future under what they project to be the antagonistic 'other'. Agrarian movements construct the 'us' at the same time that they construct the 'other' or 'them': the industrial food system, institutionalized corporate monopolies and everything and everyone that constitute this complex of the elite and the powerful. They juxtapose 'the people' or the 'community' as the 'us', and the big corporations (agro-chemical corporations, food empires, banks, and so on) and landed classes as the 'them'. Similarly, the progressive left-wing slogan 'the 1% versus the 99%' is a populist but definitely class-conscious formulation. The way food and agrarian movements construct powerful punchy slogans reflects such consciousness in the constant invocation of the 'us' and the 'other': 'industrial agriculture heats up the planet, small-scale agriculture cools down the earth', 'not about us without us', 'people before profit', 'no to agriculture without farmers', 'small-scale farmers feed the world', 'WTO kills', 'the massive movement of food around the world is causing the increased movement of people.' Their ability to condense complex conditions of their disparate base in short, graphic slogans that become key reference points and mobilizing narratives is a brilliant populist strategy of constructing the 'us' and its 'other'.

Many contemporary right-wing populist groups have evolved in a very similar manner by aggregating disparate social classes and groups in the rural world, forging a homogenizing discourse, and projecting a future in ways that somewhat converge in some ways with agrarian movements and food sovereignty movements, even when the basis, reason and implications are fundamentally different. Marc Edelman has pointed this out earlier (2014:970). For him, this is illustrated by the fact that, "many food sovereignty enthusiasts favour abolishing or diminishing regulation of local trade and of preferred products (e.g., raw milk and raw milk cheeses). In this respect, their vision sometimes converges with that of the detested neoliberals, who tend to view all regulation as onerous for business, large and small." This is concretely demonstrated by a local food sovereignty campaign in northeast United States: "They [Maine farmers] don't need inspectors to make sure they are following good practices", Tony Field and Beverly Bell declare. "[K]eeping their neighbors, families, and long-time customers in good health is an even better incentive" (Edelman 2014: 970).

Crisis and past cycles of broken promises

The feeling of extreme frustration is common to both the right-wing populist mass base and agrarian movements. In many settings in the world, this mounting frustration derives from problems around cheap food provisioning, social security and health care, jobs, neglect of public services, social decay including the menace of drug addiction, absence of redistributive reforms like land reform, persistent violence and criminality, rural-urban migration flows, and massive indebtedness,¹⁹ that separately or together generated so much angst and anger among people in the countryside. These issues are magnified during socioeconomic and political crisis. It is the *crisis* situation that provides the fertile ground for the populist seed to grow: the fact or threat of socioeconomic losses among ordinary people coinciding with the state's inability or unwillingness to act according to what people perceive to be its moral obligation to respond in times of crisis and whose 'fault' it is. Crisis revives the mass feeling of past cycles of broken promises or a broken system. It is the simultaneous convergence of multiple crises (economic growth without social equity, and so on) that has triggered the current right-wing populist upsurge. Historically, the rise of right-wing populism was accompanied by or was a response to crisis. The French 'Greenshirts' peasant movement of the 1920s and 1930s emerged as a response to the triple crisis: economically ("as an ever-deepening decline of farm prices that lasted so long and plunged so low that even the most diligent efforts could barely keep a family alive"), culturally ("the low esteem for peasants life, values, and needs..."), and politically (a "crisis of representation. There seemed to be no leader or institution in the French Third Republic with sufficient concern, comprehension, or will to devote public attention to the peasants' plight.") (Paxton 1997: 11).

¹⁹ Gerber (2014) offers a powerful analysis of the role of debt in capitalism, with reference to the rural world.

The contemporary converging multiple crises in and around the global food system and capitalism has been the general condition in which the ideas of and movements for food sovereignty emerged in the 1990s. Capitalism's response to its own crisis and the multiple crises it causes is to seek more opportunities from crisis to make more profit.

In all these, past cycles of broken promises of rural reforms and reform of the global food system have led to the accumulation of frustration and anger among rural and urban social groups and the rise of vibrant transnational agrarian, climate justice and food sovereignty movements – all with strong populist impulses and tendencies. They are increasingly linking their movements together.²⁰ It is not an accident, for example, that the 2009-2010 global food riots that involved all sorts of working people in both urban and rural spaces erupted (Bush and Martiniello 2017), and the anger, sentiments and energy that went into those riots are likely to have been transmitted to the current right-wing populist mass support.

Yet the same manifestations of capitalism in crisis have also spurred the current right-wing populist agitations, although the latter frame such crises differently, as for example, the right-wing US populists' climate change denial and Trump's electoral promise to revive the dying coal industry. And how Trump will fundamentally differ from past administrations in terms of its treatment of American agriculture and the countryside remains to be seen, although it is likely that it will continue with similar policies. The continuing past in the US agricultural front points to this likelihood. As Chrisman (2016: 1), who offered a short and sharp initial analysis of why rural America voted Trump, explains "[a]s of 2012, just four percent of farms produced two-thirds of agricultural value—that's a lot of wealth concentrated in just a few hands. Today, a small number of farmers are 'efficiently' producing more grain than ever, while metropolitan and suburban populations have ballooned." She continues, "But what of those who remain? 46 million Americans still live in the countryside, with many hollowed out towns, few job prospects, and the near impossibility of making a living off the land for all but the biggest farm operators" (see also Edelman 2018, Ulrich-Schad and Duncan 2018). This is where food sovereignty holds the potential to radicalize the discourse, erode right-wing populist agitation, and advance a more promising progressive alternative. Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck (2011) offer useful analytical and political reference points as to how this can happen, and how we should understand the highly differentiated currents of social movements calling for reforms of the food system, globally and in the context of the United States. The adverse impact of neoliberal globalization on ordinary people has been severe not just in the United States, but also globally; and its implications for the rise of right-wing populism are the same.

Divergences in the forms of collective actions, political rule, and alternatives

It is important not to forget that rural social classes and groups have a checkered record in terms of supporting right-wing, fascist political projects. The contemporary rural support for Trump in the United States (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan (2018), Putin in Russia (Mamonova (2016), Le Pen in France, Erdogan in Turkey, and Modi in India reminds us of past rural support to right-wing political ideas and initiatives, from the 'redshirt' movement in Thailand supporting Thaksin (Nishizaki 2014), to the 1920s and 1930s French fascist peasant movement or the 'greenshirts' led by Henry Dorgeres (Paxton 1997). Bello (2018) offers a critical reflection of the relationship between the rise of fascism, the peasantry and the middle class in Chile, Italy, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines seen from the contemporary context. While not forgetting and dismissing the problematic ties between right-wing populism and agrarian populism, it is also important to identify and clarify the fundamental differences and the basis for such. We can see this in a number of ways, two of which are as follows:

First, contemporary right-wing populists and progressive agrarian populists essentially differ in their takes on the crises and how to address them, as mentioned earlier. While both populisms have elements of nostalgia, the right-wing current is straightforward reactionary: defending or promoting capitalism or at least types of capitalism, such as Trump's MAGA ('Make America Great Again')

²⁰ See Edelman and Borras (2016), Tramel (2016), Brent et al. (2015), and Claeys and Delgado (2017).

agitation. Many, though not all, progressive agrarian populists and food sovereignty movements may have strong tendencies towards restorative and nostalgic narratives ('everything was fine before the machines rolled in to our villages,' and 'modern technologies entered our communities'), but these are, in general, within the broader and longer perspective of a emancipatory struggles towards alternatives, i.e. food sovereignty, via programmatic transformations (Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck 2011). Most of these progressive movements are anti-capitalist and many of them have clear socialist perspective, e.g. Brazil's MST, Andalusia's SOC, among many others, albeit coming from diverse lineages, from Leninist to anarchist.

Second, the strategies and forms of collective action of right-wing populists and progressive agrarian populists tend to be generally antagonistic to each other. While it is not inherent in right-wing populism to militarist or fascist (it can be significantly at home with liberal democracy), the recent past and current right-wing populist variants are susceptible to or inclined towards militarist and fascist tendencies. Contemporary progressive agrarian movements, especially those allied in La Via Campesina, in contrast, are fundamentally opposed to militarist and fascist methods of political rule. Right-wing populists have disdain for human rights (human rights principles, laws, institutions, activists) while progressive agrarian movements have been keen on human rights in framing their political struggles (Monsalve 2013). Food sovereignty itself is founded on the broad framework of 'human rights/rights' (Claeys 2012), just as its core component of agroecology is framed by a section of the human rights community (De Schutter 2014).

Further dangers and social media

The worldwide rise of right-wing populism poses immediate and long-term economic, social and political dangers. Economically, many of the prominent figures in right-wing populist agitations are principal actors in and beneficiaries of capitalism. This means that the 'people' they claim to be representing include the 1%, that is, oligarchs, entrepreneurs, brokers, speculators, scammers, swindlers, their supporters inside government bureaucracies, and in some cases perhaps even a wide array of organized crime. Trump and his business associates are good examples. In the Philippines, close allies and financiers of Duterte include some of the country's largest and most politically powerful landlords. Somehow, they all got lumped together in the catchall labels as 'the underdog', 'the people'. If these populist groups get entrenched and consolidated, they could maintain overall business as usual in terms of capitalist accumulation without any significant wealth redistribution through structural reforms, and yet pass this off as a people's platform and accomplishment.

Socially, racist, xenophobic, misogynistic or religious hate politics or crimes such as those in Myanmar, and also in the United States and Indonesia, or anti-immigrant hate politics or crime in the US, Europe and South Africa, or repressive politics such as attacks against the media, independent civil society organizations and academics as in Cambodia, Turkey, Ethiopia, Hungary, Russia and the Philippines, become routinized and 'normalized' in everyday life. Dissenting news are automatically branded and dismissed as 'fake news' or are accused as something that is part of a global plot, funded by some manipulative foreign forces, and journalists trolled and intimidated by the right-wing internet army.

Politically, during particular moments, right-wing populists have disdain for formal institutions. This has led scholars to conclude that populism is episodic. Mouffe (2005: 70) concluded that, "It is no doubt encouraging to see that the appeal of [right-wing political parties] diminishes once they become part of the government, and that they seem able to strive only when in opposition." Taggart (2000: 106) similarly: "The episodic nature of populism as a political phenomenon owes much to its highly ambivalent relationship to institutions. This makes it necessarily short-lived." I agree that populism tends to be episodic, but I am not entirely convinced on the arguments by Mouffe and Taggart that the episodic character of populism is explained by the populists' rejection of institutions. Yes, populists reject institutions, but not all institutions and not always. There are three points to make. First, the disdain for formal institutions that define right-wing populists tends to be *tactical* and situational. It is usually directed to a dominant elite or a faction of it, and is a political maneuver at a given political

moment rather than a rejection of institutions per se. The right-wing groups that got into state power were relaxed with these institutions, and some of them stayed there for a relatively longer period (one can argue that the notion of 'length of period' is contested). But as we have explained earlier, in or out of state power, right-wing populists have significant influence over state power anyway. Second, the disdain for formal institutions is usually *selective*, targeting those that are used by their adversaries (or indeed, 'the other') against them. Thus, they usually target liberal political institutions such as human rights, judicial institutions, electoral rules, and so on, while they usually hold on to and even help consolidate most other institutions that facilitate, defend or advance capitalist accumulation. Third, in my view, the reason for the episodic character of populism, or in the recurring moments and instances in different historical conditions, is *not* due to populists' ambivalent attitude towards formal institutions, but rather it is because of the cyclical nature of crises of capitalism and by extension of the crises of political rule (see discussion further below).

Meanwhile, social media enabled, facilitated and expanded right-wing populists' tactical rejection of institutionalized channels. This was also most effective in penetrating the countryside in the fastest way possible without filters from traditional elite brokers such as churches or small town *caciques* and other elites. Smart phones, Facebook and Twitter have, under certain conditions and in various ways, democratized access to information, whether fake news or otherwise, and provided a mass access to photo, audio and video technological facilities and resources with ease and minimal cost using smart phones. The traditional role of elite allies of geographically and socially marginalized rural population, namely, rural school teachers, church leaders, educated young intellectuals, *caciques*, among others, has been transformed, and partly, has been increasingly replaced by more diverse *in situ* and distant information brokers and populist agitators. For example, a blogger and social media agitator who is part of the core group of a right-wing populist leader can have millions of followers on Twitter or Facebook, including those who live in the countryside. What is to be pointed out here is that this can be a double-edged sword: the same technologies enabled the volunteers for Bernie Sanders to directly, quickly and frequently connect with millions of people who would become supporters of the electoral insurgency; but the right-wing upsurge led by Trump was also largely enabled by the same technologies.

But there is always a danger that the core group of right-wing populism may persist, expand in number and political influence. The way some groups fight right-wing populism by addressing populist leaders, core group and supporters can influence whether the right-wing core group gets consolidated and expanded, or undermined. There are some problematic ways of confronting right-wing populist groups. First, it is a mistake to consider a populist group ideologically homogeneous. Second, is to perceive a right-wing group as homogeneous in terms of social class, race and ethnicity. Third, it is essential to see the inherent contradictions within right-wing populist groups between leaders, core group, supporters and sympathizers. Fourth, dismissive, insulting or condescending remarks addressed to any of the leaders, core group, or supporters and sympathizers or all of them altogether can, under certain conditions, have a counterproductive effect of actually helping consolidate their perception of the antagonism between 'them' (as 'the underdog') and the 'others' (the elite). When this happens, there is a danger that the core group grows with supporters and sympathizers joining them, fortifying the previously tenuous relationship between populist leaders and their mass sympathizers. This dangerous scenario is even more likely in the era of social media where the back-and-forth exchanges are often public and where passions flare up so quickly. Fake news is generated and routinized in this process. For instance, insulting redshirt movement participants as stupid, ignorant peasants might help consolidate and expand the populist core group among Thailand's northeast rural communities. Mocking Duterte supporters' imperfect and unpolished Tagalog (the minority language of the national capital and the traditional elite) may only help consolidate Duterte's base and maintain his popularity.

Opportunities to fight right-wing populism and capitalism

As discussed earlier, the rise of right-wing populism is partly due to the multiple crises caused by capitalism. The right-wing populist agitation is anchored in a rhetoric in which salvation is, ironically, latched on capitalism, the very cause of the crisis which the populist agitation purports to address.

Unfortunately, the contradiction in this is not always obvious. This is where agrarian movements as well as food sovereignty becomes a potent social force that, together with other progressive social forces, can make a modest but significant effort at countering the rise of right-wing populism. There are a number of material reasons why this is so.

First, shared narratives about how corporate elites and oligarchs, or at least a section of it, in collusion with corrupt officials managed to break systems, whether the industrial economy or local food production, easily resonate across both right-wing populist groups and food sovereignty movements. *Second*, right-wing populist groups and agrarian movements may share a far more common actual social mass base in the countryside (and beyond) than perhaps we imagine. The general feeling of neglect, lack of wealth and power redistribution, joblessness and social decay in the countryside can easily become the same top issues among these two political groups. Economically hard-up and socially marginalized urban dwellers are likely to straddle the two political camps as well.

Third, inherent in agrarian movements and/as food sovereignty movements are their multi-class character, and it may be able to cross class lines to forge broader alliances. For example, rural constituencies of food sovereignty have forged alliance with urban sectors: workers, urban poor communities, urban consumers, and so on. There is an interesting difference or disconnect between the conditions of urban and rural classes and groups and the populisms that emerged from their narratives or movements. In general urban populists demand jobs which gives the narrative of right-wing populism so much currency in these communities, while progressive agrarian populists' principal demand is land, which also differentiates them from the conservative version of agrarian populism that are usually anchored in rich farmers' demands (no land or labour demands, but mainly on productivist and remunerative issues). These two sets of urban and rural demands, if and when cast in broader anti-capitalist agitation, can take down the pro-poor façade of right-wing populists and put them on a defensive.

Fourth, despite its encompassing agenda, agrarian movements is rarely a movement like political parties that aspire to replace an established faction of the elite in governing societies. The agrarian movements' agenda can be, and have been, co-opted by the establishment they detest, or by other populist groups, left-wing or right-wing. There are ample examples of this in the Latin America's 'pink tide' countries where food sovereignty has been enshrined in the Constitutions or national governmental policies, but interpreted in ways that are in contradiction with how social movements understood it to be, such as Venezuela's food sovereignty implementation which was largely dependent on importing cheap processed food from the global industrial food complex during the time of the oil dollar bonanza, as critically pointed out by Schiavoni (2017), or food sovereignty that got incorporated into the broader *buen vivir* platforms funded, ironically, through neo-extractivism (see also Vargara-Camus and Kay 2017, McKay et al. 2014, Giunta 2014, Henderson 2017, Clark 2017). The Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) movement founded by Subhash Palekar in India has gained much momentum, praises and support from Modi. But its awkward or even troubling overlap with the right-wing Hindu nationalist current poses difficult challenge and dilemma even for its supporters from among the organized progressive agrarian populists. In a critical reflection, Khadse et al. (2018: 214) admitted that, "There is sometimes an uncomfortable closeness of some elements of Palekar's discourse to that of Hindutva's cultural chauvinism," in addition to their observation that majority of the members of ZBNF are from the "dominant caste/middle class". As Scoones and colleagues (2018b: 1) remind us: "Mobilising alternatives to the easy capture by regressive political forces is not straightforward. New campaigns and narratives are required that go beyond simplistic appeals to 'community', empathetic individualism and localist 'sovereignties'."

Fifth and finally, there is one institutional connection that objectively links current agrarian and food sovereignty movements to right-wing agitation, even when they generally despise each other, namely, NGO funding.²¹ It warrants longer treatment. The rise of the global NGO complex and its multi-billion

²¹ The discussion on fifth issue draws on Edelman and Borras (2016), especially on the chapter on the global NGO complex and its implications for agrarian movements, as well as from the author's more than three decades

dollar annual funding portfolio has had strategic impact on social justice movements in a way because the latter has been among the recipients of such generous funding since the 1980s. A significant chunk of this massive funding is actually government money from donor countries that is conveniently retailed through the international aid infrastructure. It is along the logic of the neoliberalization of the development aid sector. Many NGOs bought into the framework that promised to deliver concrete reforms that are measurable and based on inclusive multistakeholder events. This has resulted partly in the advocacy in favour of specifically identifiable and countable individual or household ‘beneficiaries’ of specific projects. Often, these projects conveniently and deliberately omit or dismiss utterly ‘class-oriented demands and actions’ as something unfeasible, if not altogether admit that these are un-fundable. Society-wide land reform was dropped in favour of targeted participatory community-based formal land titling, structural and thus universal social policies were dropped in favour of targeting approaches like cash transfer schemes, system wide state-directed credit policies were replaced with self-help micro-finance projects, system-wide citizen accountability struggles were replaced with multistakeholderism for consultation, participation and transparency, struggles for just systems of production and trade were replaced with initiatives for farmers to get inserted into the commodity value chain. Separately and together, these instances of neoliberalization of ‘development work’ have transformed many social movements and NGOs, by radically making them more moderate, resulted in the dismantling of many local and national movements and NGOs, or in the minimum, have demobilized them – stripping many of these groups with their crucial defining features: social justice agenda for systems change, irreverence, and subversiveness. As Issa Shivji observes (referring to broader donor complex that includes NGOs): “Revolutionary standpoints and class perspectives gave way to eclectic activism as radicals jumped on agendas set by donor agencies” (Shivji 2017: 10).

Despite the problematic character of NGO fund retailing infrastructure, it has been a critical pillar for the rise, and the ability to maintain significant presence, of radical and progressive social justice movements, especially agrarian movements and food sovereignty movements. But the rise of right-wing populism in many OECD countries rendered this complex quite vulnerable politically. One has to remember when the conservative Harper government almost successfully dismantled this complex in Canada; Trudeau restored this. Some have already partially collapsed amid right-wing pressure, with combined demands to get rid of such aid funds and/or to redirect them to promoting nationalist interest of national corporations.

How to shield agrarian and food sovereignty and the progressive NGO complex from right-wing populist assault where and when this happens is not obvious and straightforward. The challenge is how to extricate the NGO funding complex from their current entanglement with government funds, reclaim their subversive roots, and strengthen their deep commitment to autonomy and social justice and in helping build mass movements. Two unintended outcomes of this problem are perhaps the possible re-emergence of smaller NGO donors who do not rely on big government funds as important activist entity (they were sidelined by big NGOs), and stronger self-reliance in resource generation by social movements and NGOs.

What is to be done? Big and insurgent with a socialist perspective

The ‘consensus at the center’ has dominated mainstream responses to addressing contentious issues confronting the people. This ‘consensus at the center’, Mouffe (2016: 64) argues, “removes from politics one of its constitutive elements – its partisan nature.” The ‘consensus’ inherently seeks reforms within the framework of ‘what is do-able’, leading to its inability or unwillingness to go beyond the limits imposed by the status quo. What is perhaps needed is a strategy of ‘what is possible’. Here, the difference between the two is that the former works within the limits and possibilities of ‘what is do-able’ within a given balance of social forces, while the latter takes an insurgent approach by disrupting a given balance of social forces in order to pursue transformative

of carrying out political work within the NGO-social movement world.

deep social reforms. It pertains to what is possible in terms of disrupting the status to radical reforms that are otherwise impossible to even imagine.

The problems confronting the rural world have been huge, persistent and entrenched. Demands for reprieve and reforms in the past were met with cycles of broken promises. The dominant ideology that spearheaded neoliberal globalization included various strands of middle-of-the-road centrist politics that basically promoted the kind of capitalism we have today and tried to put a ‘human face’ to it, but failed. Many of the various strands of labour parties and social-democratic parties worldwide are largely responsible for this. Reviewing how capitalism has, over time, put humanity and ecology in their current dire situation Patel and Moore (2017: 41) remind us that there is an urgent “need to dream for more radical change than contemporary politics offer.” The working class and the middle class worldwide were angry and were demanding radical reforms. Right-wing populists answered their call – big and insurgent – with a great success, at least for now.

Is it politically non-feasible to ask big and act in an insurgent way in a progressive context? Becky Bond and Zack Exley (2017) of the Bernie Sanders ‘political revolution’ platform and campaign thought that it is not; that in fact it is the only way to go forward. They have shown, from the trenches, that it is difficult – but not impossible. Bond and Exley’s book’s title, *Rules for Revolutionaries* is not a random catchy one. It is in direct conversation with Saul Alinsky’s classic book, *Rules for Radicals* (Alinsky 1971). Bond and Exley recognized the contribution made by Alinsky, especially in his specific context, and the value of community organizing focusing on concrete immediate issues that could deliver palpable gains to community members, all done in an organizing and mobilizing method that is irreverent. Alinsky’s approach would find wide-ranging adherents worldwide, and not surprisingly, among what would become actors in the middle-of-the-road politics. Ultimately, Alinsky’s approach only aspires to alleviate the condition of poor and socially marginalized communities. But for the Bernie Sanders team, the nature and extent of problems are far beyond a local community and so huge that these require agents of social change to think big, demand system change and use appropriate creative and insurgent ways. This was subsequently framed in an open call for a ‘political revolution’ by the 99%, i.e., the people – the working class and the middle class – with a socialist perspective, as the Bernie Sanders campaign puts it – generating political, financial and logistical support from millions of ordinary people, especially from among the millennials. It is definitely a populist electoral insurgency, one that is unheard of in the annals of American history. Sanders did not win the Democratic Party primary, but the campaign and the movement left us with an enormous political treasure to mine for our own political projects wherever and whatever these are. The principles of: *ask big*, *act insurgent*, and boldly advance a *democratic socialist perspective* in a context of a *political revolution* may actually gain traction in far more places than we have conservatively assumed. “Audacity is crucial... and if the democratic and progressive force do not adopt a bold stance, we can be sure that the extreme right will do so,” Innigo Errejon (2016: 67), political secretary of *Podemos* in the Spanish state, reminds us.

Before going into some propositions on what is to be done, there are at least three things that tend to be sporadically taken up popularly as framework for, or methods of, struggles against right-wing populism, but which may actually be problematic. First, engaging in and mobilizing around *restorative narratives and campaigns*, insinuating that the *pre-rightwing* populism period was well and good for ‘the people’. This is quite popular worldwide, especially among those who were in power prior to the current populist insurgency and upsurge, such as liberal democrats and social democrats. A significant section of anti-Trump voices take such a stance. A section of the mainstream elite opposition and social democratic civil society groups takes this problematic positioning in the Philippines. There is a compelling need to take a two-pronged framework of social struggles where the direction of the main blow should simultaneously be against the old regime and against the current right-wing upsurge. The broad coalition of various smaller left-wing groups in the Philippines launched in 2017 a united front called ‘*Laban ng Masa*’ (‘Struggle of the Masses’; or ‘People’s Struggle’), explicitly declaring that it is simultaneously anti-Duterte’s populism/fascism and the elitist Liberal Party that was in power before Duterte representing the bourgeoisie and landed classes in an extended period of the country’s history. This stand is politically sharp, and the political initiative, while small-scale at the moment, has

some promise (see also Docena 2018: 22). Second, the contribution of *small-scale and 'too polite and neat' campaigns and mobilizations* to subverting right-wing populism, however well intentioned, may prove to be insignificant. Part of the 'consensus at the center' approach that is partly to be blamed for the current right-wing populist swing is the dogmatic imposition of 'multistakeholderism' – the codification of multistakeholder approaches to resolving class and identity conflicts whose starting point is an implicit assumption of the absence of power imbalances along class and other social hierarchies (see, e.g. McKeon 2018). Grand mismatches abound: for huge problems about despotism of local rulers and chieftains, the answer is community-based conflict resolution mechanisms; for problems with the extreme greed, bullying and impunity committed by transnational corporations, the answer is multistakeholder platforms; for rampant problems of land grabbing, the answer is transparent and consultative administrative processes (of land grabbing!), and so on. There are serious class and power imbalances in these spaces where dominant actors actively ignored or deliberately misunderstood politicized notions of 'accountability' (Ribot 1999, Gaventa 2006, Fox 2007), or deliberately avoided radical interpretation and use of governance instruments such as Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC) (Franco 2014). Third, a sectoral struggle (e.g. trade union, peasant) against right-wing populism is a necessary but far from sufficient banner for social justice framing and for a spearhead social movement that can unite working classes and sectors that are struggling, or have the potential to struggle, against right-wing populism. The scale of operations and exposure of food sovereignty movements is relatively marginal compared to that of right-wing populism. In fact, food sovereignty – its ideas and movements – radically shrinks when viewed from the perspective of big politics which right-wing populist groups steer.

If the problems confronting the rural world are huge, persistent and entrenched, then only *structural, deep social reforms*, i.e. systemic reforms within and/or against capitalism, can serve as *double-pronged spearheads* that could deliver the main blow against right-wing populism, on the one side, and against the subjective forces of 'restorative romantics' (particularly liberal and social democrats of various strands), on the other side. These deep reforms should have cumulative, ratchet effect towards greater structural reforms or even *revolutionary* social change, and not the *anti-subversive petty reform incrementalism* that the 'consensus at the center' promoted that do not recast existing social structures in any significant degree. These are deep social reforms that are understood and advocated, unapologetically, within a longer and broader socialist perspective.

To have a bigger impact, agrarian movements have to engage in broader political initiatives (electoral politics, political parties, multi-sectoral alliances, and so on), spheres of politics that these many of these agrarian movements and their broader coalitional food sovereignty movements are not yet significantly engaged in. More importantly, it is critical that agrarian movements and food sovereignty movements be consciously framed within a broadly socialist perspective. And in the context of the subsequent discussion below, it is useful to think less of agrarian movements as 'farmers' movements', but of sectoral movements that comprise them, namely, peasant movements, farmers' movements, fishers' movements, indigenous peoples movements, community food movements, and so on, on the one hand, and the broader social justice movements that include multi-class, multisectoral alliances (trade unions, urban poor, middle class, and so on) and political parties, on the other hand. This is because in many societies where right-wing populism has to be countered, agrarian movements and food sovereignty movements are either absent, e.g. Russia,²² Cambodia, or relatively marginal, e.g. Myanmar and South Africa. This is in addition to the fact that agrarian movement banner issues (land reform, food sovereignty), while strategically important, are relatively narrow or discounted from a capitalist narrative compared to what is warranted by the general political situation.

In the era of converging global crises and right-wing populist agitations, the relevance and urgency of radical deep social reforms, or indeed, a 'revolution', have been highlighted even more. Five goals of deep social reforms and ways to pursue them are particularly relevant in the current condition of the rural world today and in the context of confronting right-wing populism, namely, *redistribution, recognition, restitution, regeneration* and *resistance* – or rather, *revolution* (as will be discussed

²² See, for example, Visser et al. (2015) for a relevant discussion in the context of Russia.

further below).²³ These are deep reforms that are directed at the heart of social structures and institutions that reflect and maintain classes and class rule, and could, or should, ratchet up towards structural transformation that could undermine capitalism and pave the way for a socialist alternative. It does not shy away from class conflict and politics; in fact these are at the heart of the five R's. These proposed 'deep social reforms' are fundamentally different from the dominant 'third way' or social-democratic reforms, arguably, because the latter actually legitimize and strengthen capitalism through incremental reforms that are at best ameliorative, as they shy away from class antagonisms and thus class politics, while the transformative deep social reforms put forward here, if taken seriously really constitute a political revolution, and not just reforms. The five R's put forward here require multi-class struggles far broader than agrarian struggles. Nevertheless, agrarian movements may be able to make strategic contribution to these social struggles. We now turn to an abbreviated discussion of each of these goals below.

First, where wealth and the means of production to create wealth, especially land, in the context of the rural world, are monopolized by a few, veering towards the obscene 1%-versus-99% ratio, wealth and power *redistribution* becomes urgent and fundamental. In the context of agrarian societies, it includes redistribution of access and control of the key means of production: land, water, seas, forests – thus contesting the essence of capitalism.²⁴ Second, where social exclusion, marginalization and discrimination by one dominant social group over other groups constitute an oppressive social complex layered in xenophobia, racism, misogyny, and so on, social struggles for *recognition* can become an important struggle that can expose the fundamentally regressive nature of right-wing populists. In agrarian societies, this can entail recognition of indigenous peoples' right over their territory, or women's rights to their distinct access and control of the means of production: land, water, forests. Third, where people lost their land, territory, houses, savings, pensions and other important means of production and reproduction because of broad corporate resource grabs, or lost healthcare because of scams by financial swindlers,²⁵ social struggles for *restitution* have to be a key front. In

²³ The discussion on the 5 R's draws from a long history of my work on land politics in collaboration with several colleagues and comrades, starting from redistribution and recognition that are basically a direct and logical extension of struggles for land and territory, and in recent years, especially informed by my work on land grabs and expulsions, the inseparable issue of 'restoration' of access, or 'restitution' has been brought; thus, 3 R's. The last few years in my research work have been devoted to researching the intersection between climate change politics (mitigation and adaptation) and land grabbing, and this is where the 'regeneration' angle has come about. The discussion and inclusion here of 'resistance' is in dialogue with Fraser's third R, namely, 'representation'. For the progression of our work on this, see Franco, Borras and Monsalve (2015), Borras and Franco (forthcoming), and Franco and Borras (forthcoming). Nancy Frasers' work on 'redistribution', 'recognition', and 'representation' provides some inspiration to the current formulation (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Patel and Moore (2017: 207-212) put forward a similar proposition for the way forward around five R's: recognition, reparation, redistribution, reimagination, and recreation – where individually and collectively some of these have overlapping messages as the 5 R's in the current paper.

²⁴ Redistribution of the means of production, especially land, in the context of agrarian societies is key to class politics and struggle: it can prevent corporate and rich peasant capture of food sovereignty, and in its core, agroecology. The organic food industry was easily captured by corporations and got routinized within capitalism. Part of the reason for that is the nature of organic farming, i.e. agnostic to class: everyone can do it. Quickly, technology for large-scale organic farming was developed where corporations dominate in production and distribution. This is where the potential of agroecology may draw a difference. The close loop nature of agroecology requires that those engaged in agroecology have control over the means of production and natural resources not in parcelized manner but in their natural ecological web: land, forest, water source, and so on. My sense is that agroecology is likely to flourish better where the capitalist notion of individual land property regime has not yet dominated *or has already been reconstructed through redistributive reforms*. In most settings marked by existing land monopoly and absence of access to natural resources, the key is the *struggle for redistribution* to allow for agroecology to flourish in a larger or even system-wide scale, is to be pursued. Even when corporations may not be keen on agroecology (as organic farming may be far more feasible and lucrative) allowing for the flourishing of enclaves of agroecology zones, enclave-type experiments in agroecology can be susceptible to rich peasant capture, as some tendencies in the Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) in India demonstrates. Rosset and Altieri (2018) offer a state of the art on the science and politics of agroecology.

²⁵ Harvey's broadly cast 'accumulation by dispossession' comes to mind (Harvey (2003)).

many rural areas, this means restitution of access to land, territory, water, forests, especially in light of the global land grabbing during the past decade.²⁶ Fourth, ecological and climate crisis is the hallmark of the contemporary period in world history largely caused by capitalism, and has deep roots in the history of capitalism, in the capitalocene (Moore 2017). Social struggles for ecological *regeneration* and environmental justice have become an integral part of broader social justice struggles, as Martinez-Alier et al. (2017) argue. This connects with what Patel and Moore (2017: 43) call ‘reparation ecology’, which they define as: “Redistributing care, land, and work so that everyone has a chance to contribute to the improvement of their lives and to that of the ecology around them can undo the violence of abstraction that capitalism makes us perform every day.” In the context of agrarian and food sovereignty movements, this can include struggles for agroecological farming systems (Rosset and Altieri 2018). Fifth, these four goals of deep social reforms can only be accomplished through fierce, relentless and disruptive *resistance* within and/or against capitalism – which really means, political *revolution*. This puts agrarian movements directly in confrontation with right-wing populist groups, the latter being generally believers, or champions, or defenders, or apologists of capitalism.

Political actions around these five social reforms that expose the contradictory ideological positions between social justice movements and right-wing populism may progressively undermine the latter. This is because right-wing populists are unlikely to meet the social justice-oriented demands of ‘the people’ because ultimately their basic interests are likely to fundamentally clash with the people’s demands. Vanaik (2018) reminds us, for example, that basic agrarian issues (land, food, rural jobs) render Modi politically vulnerable. As emphasized earlier, these five fronts of struggle require broader political struggles beyond agrarian and food sovereignty struggles, but it will be important for these struggles to have a solid agrarian component.

The five R’s discussed above are not to be treated like a checklist from which one can cherry-pick in checking boxes. The five R’s are linked in their logic because these are responding to inherently interconnected social processes. These can be seen in a few illustrations. First, contemporary capitalism has seized the opportunity to make profit out of responses to climate change via market-based transactions such as carbon sequestration and trading, biofuels, and neoliberal nature conservation. In essence, it is ‘*regeneration by dispossession*’ – defined here as the capitalist project of operating within and regenerating nature by dispossessing ordinary villagers to facilitate continuous capital accumulation. Many of the conservation initiatives associated with climate change politics, in varying degrees, are associated with this strategy. One way to confront ‘regeneration by dispossession’ is through ‘*regeneration by restitution*’, ‘*regeneration by recognition*’, ‘*regeneration by redistribution*’, or a combination of these, all in the context explained above.

Second, ‘redistribution without transformation’ represents, in many settings today, the pre-populist agitation period, the elitist ‘business as usual’ era. Various forms of redistribution that were usually concessions that were outcomes of social struggles, such as land redistribution, were ultimately carried out within a broadly hostile neoliberal system, so that any initial gains were easily cancelled out. Many land reforms in the past (prior to and during neoliberalism) suffered the same fate: small-scale farmer beneficiaries lost out within a broadly neoliberal agricultural policy climate. The neoliberal era populist cash transfer schemes can, arguably, fit this category. Some redistributive reforms provoked tensions around issues related to identity politics, such as the recognition claims by indigenous peoples or women that were absent if not altogether undermined by conventional land reforms. All these have contributed to the accumulation of frustration and anger by ordinary people, many of whom have turned to support right-wing populist groups. Struggling against right-wing populism can be done partly by pursuing struggles for redistribution that has to be dovetailed with further reforms: thus, ‘*redistribution with transformation*’, ‘*redistribution with recognition*’, ‘*redistribution with regeneration*’, or a combination of these.

²⁶ For an updated overview of the state of the art in land grabbing literature, see Franco and Borrás (forthcoming).

If we take a closer look at the five R's, we can begin to understand better how their logics are intertwined, how under certain conditions their failure in the past fed into the right-wing populist 'politics of appearances', and how they contain the potential to subvert right-wing populism. Middle-of-the-road, social democratic type reformers shied away from big and often insurgent reforms. Yet, one has to not forget that most of the rights and freedoms we have today, e.g. eight hour working days, minimum wage laws, the formal end of apartheid in South Africa, and so on were big and insurgent in their own settings and time and seemed impossible until the political momentum in their favour overruled any conservatism, skepticism, or pessimism. The problems confronting humanity today that are intertwined with the rise of right-wing populisms are huge and entrenched. The only way to erode them is to ask big and act insurgent; the five R's put forward here are key institutional basis for such political struggles, within which agrarian movements and food sovereignty movements have logical entry points.

Urgent task: confronting right-wing populism by reclaiming populism

Errejon (2016: 67) argues that right-wing populism "has been able to recuperate the powerful idea 'community' – that we must build a spirit of community at a time when there is more insecurity, more anxiety and fear, more uncertainty about tomorrow." What is being emphasized here is that confronting right-wing populists should start with a good grasp of how and why they were effective in what they are doing.

The parallelism, resemblances and interconnections between right-wing populism and the populism of agrarian movements and food sovereignty movements are not random accidents. The political economy upon which such populisms emerge partly shapes the emerging diverse politics. The boundaries between right-wing populism and its social base in the countryside on the one hand, and the populism of agrarian and food sovereignty movements are constantly porous, blurring and malleable. This means partly that there is a slippery slope down which the progressive populism of agrarian and food sovereignty movements may slide to reinforce rather than undermine right-wing populism. There are two urgent tasks and challenges for activists in food sovereignty movements in this context: to avoid such a slippery slope, and to transform the parallelisms, resemblances and interconnections in the two populisms into an extraordinary political opportunity and emancipatory force that can contribute to strategically eroding right-wing populism. Accomplishing such twin tasks requires (re)claiming populisms but without its authoritarian trappings on the one hand, and being class conscious on the other hand.

The first thing that is required here is our ability to rid ourselves of the traditional baggage that sees populism, in whatever form it manifests, as necessarily and always naïve or uninformed, or class blind, or a Trojan horse by classes antagonistic to the working class, or ideologically opposed to democratic socialist perspectives. In the context of left-wing politics, this baggage is in the form of the ghost from critiques of the Russian *narodnism* of the second half of the 19th century, that it will be class blind and engaged in conservative and romantic restorative struggles. But as Shanin (1983c: 270) reminded us: "Russian populists did produce a class analysis, if a different one from that of Engels, i.e. concluding that unlike France of 1848, or of 1871, the main forces due to face each other in Russia are the state and a state-bred squiredom and capitalists versus the 'labouring class', i.e. a plebeian front of peasants, workers and intelligentsia, allied with the radical soldiers." In the context of right-wing populism, Errejon (2016: 68) laments that there is a mistaken assumption that populist methods of work "could be paving the way for [right-wing populist] ideas." He disagrees: "it helps [right-wing populism] much more if we abandon all forms of collective affects [i.e. 'passion'], and thus cede this space to them." Mouffe (2016: 124) insists on "re-appropriating the term populism." She said: "That it is being used in a derogatory way by parties who defend the status quo is no reason to abandon it. It's necessary to reclaim it... and to give it a positive meaning with the notion of 'left-wing populism.'"

In the era of contemporary right-wing populism, class and class politics have become even more relevant. EP Thompson (2013: 9, original emphasis [orig. 1968]) explains that, "the class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men [sic] are born – or enter involuntarily.

Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms.” He elaborates further: “If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law.” “Consciousness of class,” he concludes, “arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way” (ibid.). What is being argued here is that despite the apparent tension and contradiction, ‘class politics’ and radical ‘populism’ can be put together productively, analytically and politically.

In the context of what is being put forward here, even the conventional formulations by communist and socialist parties can be considered, arguably, as populist in some ways: the general communist and socialist parties’ notion of the basic alliance of workers and peasants, the notion of ‘revolutionary patriotic forces of workers, peasants and middle classes or forces,’ Mao Zedong’s notion of the ‘mass line’, or some of his oft-cited punchlines that are, arguably, populist, for example: “Let a hundred flowers blossom, and a thousand schools of thought contend!” (and for that matter, most of the Maoist insurgent movements). Finally, perhaps most of the peasant movements studied by Eric Wolf, with special reference to the agency of the middle peasantry, may, to some degree, qualify in the category of agrarian populism (Wolf 1969). The flipside of this is that only ‘workerist’ Leninist parties, rigid and sectarian, could not be accused of populism in the latter’s pejorative meaning. The use of the term ‘working people’ seemed to be generally acceptable to most Marxists to denote the basic “worker-peasant alliance”, but as Shivji (2017) argues, is poorly elaborated. Shivji elaborates on the concrete basis underlying the concept of working people, especially in the context of neoliberalism, an explanation that largely overlaps with Bernstein’s notion of ‘classes of labour’.²⁷ Shivji (2017: 11, original emphasis) explains:

Commodification and privatization of health care, education, water, sanitation and removal of subsidies from essential foods which all formed part of the social wage goods previously means that now the poor have either to pay for it or go without. All in all, the materiality which underlies producers—peasants and pastoralists, proletarians and semi-proletarians, street hawkers selling consumer goods and peddlers selling cooked food, operators and repairers in backyard workshops—in virtually all sectors is the minimizing of their necessary consumption and maximizing their labour. I therefore proposed a modified definition of primitive accumulation under neoliberalism—the process of surplus extraction by capital based on expropriation of a part of necessary consumption of the producer. This is then the material basis common to all sectors of what I called the working people.

Shivji’s elaboration on the notion of ‘working people’ and Bernstein’s ‘classes of labour’ are important building conceptual basis for an idea of ‘class-based populism’, or ‘class struggles with populist consciousness or sensitivities’, or indeed ‘*class-conscious left-wing populism*’ as possible alternative ways of arguing that what is needed are political struggles within and/or against capitalism in the contemporary era. These semantic formulations are definitely all contradictory in terms, partly implying concrete contradictions that are in turn partly reflective of the current conditions of the peasantry, working class and petty bourgeoisie. These formulations are not products of idealist thinking. Rather, these contradictory terms and concepts directly reflect the current condition of the

²⁷ Bernstein builds his concept of ‘classes of labour’ on Panitch and Leys’s conclusion about ‘the growing numbers...who now depend – directly and indirectly – on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction’ (Panitch and Leys 2001:ix as cite in Bernstein 2010: 110-111). Bernstein (ibid.: 111) elaborates as follows:

They have to pursue their reproduction in conditions of growing income insecurity and the ‘pauperization’ as well as employment insecurity and the downward pressures exerted by the neoliberal erosion of social provision for those in ‘standard’ wage employment, who are shrinking as a proportion of classess of labour in most regions of the South, and in some instances in some absolute terms as well. Pressures on reproduction have even more serious consequences for the growing numbers of what Mike Davis (2006: 178) calls the ‘global informal working class,’ which is ‘about one billion strong, making it the fastest-growing, and most unprecedented, social class of earth.’

‘classes of labour’ or ‘working people’ that include the peasantry, where there are no strictly well-defined proletariat class and, indeed, peasantry in the classical sense. This in turn impacts agency and agrarian politics in various ways (Bernstein 2010, chapter 8). Shivji’s (2017: 12, original emphasis) argument is relevant in this context; he said that ‘working people’

is a ‘class’ against capital and has great potency in political discourse and mobilization... I believe politically, and even conceptually, the term working people has greater potency and validity than worker–peasant alliance. I would venture to say that even as a description of the agency for transformation the concept of working people sounds more sensible and convincing than worker–peasant alliance led by the proletariat or proletarian ideology. On a conceptual scale, therefore, the concept of working people is higher than worker–peasant alliance albeit lower than the concept of working class. Only real life struggles against the neoliberal phase of capitalist imperialism will help us further to theorize the concept of working people.

It is in the context of the current fragmentation of ‘classes of labour’ (in Bernstein framing) and of Shivji’s ‘working people’ that we also need to take seriously the condition and politics of intersectionality. As Bernstein (2010: 115, original emphasis) reminds us:

class relations are universal but not exclusive ‘determinations’ of social practices in capitalism. They intersect and combine with other social differences and divisions, of which gender is the most widespread and which can also include oppressive and exclusionary relations of race and ethnicity, religion and caste.

In the definition of populism that we offered in the beginning of this paper, the formulations of a ‘working people’ (or movements of ‘classes of labour’?) are, arguably, populist in character – but none of which is class blind. The current condition of ‘classes of labour’ or ‘working people’ and the peasantry require political struggles that respond to immediate and long-term, material and political interests of social classes and groups. There is no doubt that the task of getting the ‘working people’ organized and mobilized is extremely difficult for various reasons, but there is something definite about it: that the conventional progressive or revolutionary ways of organizing and mobilizing have not been that effective anymore. On the flipside, the notion of ‘classes of labour’ and ‘working people’ partly explains the rise of left-wing populist groups (Podemos in the Spanish state, Syriza in Greece – before all the internal problems in the latter), and partly explains the rise of right-wing populist groups who are able to conjure a ‘community’ of such ‘classes of labour’ or ‘working people’ in ways that are more passionate and dramatic: the left-behind, the pushed aside, the forgotten, and so on. What this partly tells us is that it is on the concept of ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein) or ‘working people’ (Shivji) that we can concretely anchor the notion of a ‘class conscious left-wing populism’. Two further concepts warrant elaboration, namely, socialism and revolution.

On the one hand, and building on the assumption that the fundamental problem is capitalism, it becomes inconceivable to find a future within it. Thus, if it is not capitalism, then what is it? It brings us back to socialism. The immediate and most difficult challenge here is similar to the problem we face in reclaiming ‘populism’ in the context of agrarian politics: it comes with a lot of baggage. In this paper, I could get only as far as identify a skinny list of potential co-owners of such a socialist political project and a minimum rule about process. It should be a kind of socialism that a broad mass base can be rallied, from the conventional left to anarcho-sindicalist inspired groups including contemporary anti-fa groupings and de-growth activists, from Bernie Sanders’ supporters (among the millennials and precarious middle class) to the multitude of hard-up classes and sectors that formed the base and supporters of (arguably left-wing populist) political parties like Podemos in the Spanish state and Syriza in Greece, from radical agrarian movements to urban food activists, from radical feminists to climate justice activists. The conventional left notion of a ‘vanguard party’ or ‘corps of cadres’ to lead mass movements, in its original Leninist formulation that was later codified in a Stalinist tradition in which groups and individuals that do not agree on a particular political line got branded within a ‘revolutionary-counterrevolutionary framework’ will be a non-starter, and neither is the Maoist principle of subordinating all forms of mass struggles to armed struggle. In this context, and for those

working in the context of communist and socialist party work, Rosa Luxemburg's earlier ideas of a 'mass party' and 'mass strike' and Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'organic intellectuals' may have renewed relevance and traction. But those working from this tradition will have to rethink hard how to forge productive conversations with those who subscribe to other traditions, for example, along the ideas of anarchism and its anti-authoritarian stance. The greatest challenge may prove to be on how to sustain the initial mild interest on (or non-resistance to) socialism of the types of Bernie Sanders' supporters, the broader agrarian and food sovereignty movements, and the emerging climate justice activist circles many of which may not have been sensitized to and significantly engaged in socialist politics despite their deep anti-capitalist sentiments. If Bernie Sanders managed to boldly put forward an openly socialist agenda to be carried out through a 'political revolution' in the US context in the 21st century,²⁸ and millions of people across the middle and working classes and race, gender and generational divide came on board, a broader international conversation and political project explicitly framed within socialism and revolution becomes feasible.

Class-blind populist struggles will not be able to accomplish these tasks despite possible momentary popularity, but neither do conventional rigid class-based struggles. Class-blind populist struggles will fail because they negate the existence of concrete class tensions and conflict among the classes and groups they bundle together. Conventional purist class-based struggles will fall short in the task because these will be unable to capture and reflect the current condition of 'classes of labour', as well as other social practices that are just as key in politics as class.

On the other hand, what I mean here by 'revolution' is, and based on the Oxford dictionary, 'a dramatic and wide-reaching change in conditions, attitudes, or operation'. I do not mean it here 'armed, violent revolution'.²⁹ More pointedly, the term is used here in a similar way as it is used in the Bernie Sanders' 'political revolution': a deep commitment against the anti-subversive petty reform incrementalism promoted by the social forces behind the 'consensus at the center.' This task poses a difficult challenge partly because the justifications, mechanisms and processes of the anti-subversive petty reform incrementalism have been routinized and normalized to the point that it invisibilizes what is wrong with this approach, and the many issues that do matter to people. A good example is the NGO funding and work discussed earlier.

Combining class and populism is desirable despite all the tension and contradictions that it necessarily internalizes, but the political act of combining these two does not happen in random. What is most promising is an enriched and reinvigorated left-wing populism, that is anti-capitalist and socialist in orientation, and is *fundamentally founded* on the alliance of the poor and middle peasantry, 'classes of labor' or 'working people' and, arguably, precarious stratum of the petty bourgeoisie, *and* their overlapping social groupings based on multiple 'identifiers' (community, gender, race, ethnicity, generation, etc.), *rather than* one that is essentially an identity-based populism where class is altogether absent or deliberately negated, or is a mere footnote, or an after-thought, if and when it is referenced.

Some left-wing groups, especially those with communist and socialist orientation, are already engaging in similar rethinking, although one should not expect that the baggage of the past dominated by an anti-populism impulse within these movements would fade away as quickly as the current concrete condition warrants it to. The reported tension between *Podemos* and the conventional left political parties in the Spanish state is an indication. In settings where the process

²⁸ 'Socialism' and 'revolution' in Sanders' platform did not get a treatment in the same manner as these were treated in the conventional history of Marxist revolutions historically. But that is precisely my point: a creative reimagination on how to reintroduce such concepts and gain wider purchase that these deserve because efforts that are more of the same in the conventional political traditions are not working as effectively as we want them to be.

²⁹ Although I would like to point out and recognize the long history of people's assertion of their inherent right to take up arms against unjust tyrannical and oppressive systems, as many democratic revolutions (e.g. the French and American revolutions) and anti-colonial revolutions (e.g. the Philippine revolution against the Spanish colonialism) demonstrated.

involves left parties and movements with relatively diminished political power and influence, there is a possibility of greater openness to exploring possibilities of a broad united front with more or less class conscious 'left-wing populist' character.³⁰

This reclaiming and reformulation constitute a sharp rebuke of certain problematic populisms in the agrarian tradition. Examples are some Indian populist peasant movements (Assadi 1994; Brass 1994). The problem with these types of movements is not that they are class blind, because it seems that in fact they are not. The problem is their consciousness of the antagonistic class interests that exist, and their *deliberate* effort to downplay the tensions and contradictions within a movement or political agitation and create a single discourse under the dominant class, that is, rich peasant, banner. When such peasant movements consciously block rural working class issues such as land reform, landless labourer's work and wage issues, and so on, from getting into the agenda of populist mobilizations, and instead narrowly focus on and limit agenda to 'fairer' (i.e., always meaning 'higher') prices for their produce, defence of the private property regime, and so on, it acquires a conservative character. Its leadership structure tends to be just as conservative and elitist (Pattenden 2005). This is not a naïve type of agrarian populism; it is a consciously reactionary type of populism. In my own work among and understanding of contemporary agrarian and food sovereignty movements, most of them do not share this type of populism. In fact, the former ardently struggle to combat such tendencies among their ranks and within broad alliances. Thus to lump together all current agrarian and food sovereignty movements into a singular type of (conservative/reactionary/utopian) populism is not only unfair, not fully informed and tends to be naïve, at least empirically, but more importantly, can politically undermine a potent social force that can mobilize to help erode right-wing populism.

Meanwhile, in the liberal tradition, the centrality of the individual has evolved into a populist discourse around the *middle class*, vaguely defined in general terms, and never rigorously defined in socioeconomic terms. Celebrated and held sacred are the ideas of entrepreneurship and opportunities where an individual can succeed and become a solid middle class if they are entrepreneurial enough and are given the opportunity. It aggregates the working class and even sections of the upper bourgeoisie into this *amorphous* category of the middle class. This is one brand of populism that is absolutely class blind, in a deliberate way. In his public talks, Bernie Sanders is always deliberate to differentiate his take from this mainstream idea by always using the phrase, "the middle class *and* the working class". Sander's formulation is still vague, but it suggests consciousness about class and class politics. That is a promising way of framing a class-conscious populism.

Finally, in their attempt at reclaiming the term 'sovereignty' by giving it a radically democratic meaning, with some modest and steady success, food sovereignty movements are necessarily ensnared in the baggage of its very name, 'sovereign' or 'sovereignty'. One interpretation of the sovereign in food sovereignty can have close affinity to right-wing populists' agitational lines: 'the people – 'the sovereign', 'sovereignty equals nationalism', 'sovereignty is nativism or localism', or what Scoones et al. (2018b) call's 'localist sovereignties'.³¹ The term could trigger further complicated questions when a question such as 'sovereignty from whom' is put forward as Teodor Shanin does,³² or it does summon the central state that may have an agenda opposed to food sovereignty movements', as James C. Scott cautioned us.³³ Progressive agrarian movements and food sovereignty movements have far more progressive and radical interpretations of what 'sovereignty' means which is largely a popular interpretation, and why the term made it to the center of its platform which was quite tactical during the particular conjuncture of the late 1980s and early 1990s in the midst of the struggle against neoliberal globalizations and WTO. Robbins (2015) brilliantly explores the 'localization problematic'

³⁰ The lines of thought of Herbert Docena, a committed Marxist academic and political activist in the Philippines (Docena 2018: 22) is, arguably, along this line (even when Docena might disagree with the 'left-wing populist' label).

³¹ See relevant discussion by Mamonova (2018) in the context of Ukraine.

³² Teodor Shanin personal communication with the author, 25 February 2018.

³³ This is part of James C. Scott's opening address at the major international conference on food sovereignty held at Yale University in September 2013.

in food sovereignty, and the analytical and political dilemmas and contradictions she has identified are critically important in our current discussion about ‘sovereignty’ and ‘localism’ in the context of right-wing populism and food sovereignty. Indeed there are awkward parallelisms and resemblances between right-wing populism and food sovereignty, which can constitute the slippery slope that we were talking about earlier. But as we know, the internal political debates and critical literature on food sovereignty are far richer than the one line of interpretation cited above. Most activists and critical scholars take sovereign in its ‘popular meaning’, ‘the people’ (Patel 2009). In this context, Schiavoni (2015) puts forward the useful notion of ‘competing sovereignties.’

This is where the tradition from class-based movements becomes even more urgent and necessary than ever, namely, the *internationalist perspective*. The emergence of Bernstein’s ‘classes of labour’ or Shivji’s ‘working people’ is *global*, across the conventional North-South divide. This partly explains for the global phenomenon of right-wing populist agitation. The issues that are addressed by all strands of populism have their logic not confined to a national territory; they are international, and are inserted into the dynamics of global capitalism. The struggles within and/or against capitalism are to be fought within national territories *and* internationally. It is not an either/or question. Food sovereignty movements have actual and potential contributions, albeit unevenly across space and over time, to such struggles that are ‘(sub)national with international perspective’ *and* ‘international struggles with (sub)national roots’. *Internationalism* can be a counterweight to the xenophobic nationalism of right-wing populist agitations. As An internationalist perspective is different from a ‘globalist’ one that celebrates and promotes neoliberal globalization. For example, *Confederacion Paysanne France* is an internationalist movement, while Macron is a neoliberal globalist. An internationalist perspective takes as its starting point that social class and other identity struggles are fought in local communities, but that solidarity struggles are necessary and necessarily cross-border in character because of the international interconnection of the causes, conditions and consequences of the multiple crises. Because the root causes are international in nature, in the context of global capitalism, resistance and the building of alternatives must also be internationalized. This is easier said than done. How to translate this into actual political work in the trenches, whether neighborhood or trade union organizing, rural community mobilization, or electoral competition is another matter, and this is proving extremely challenging to progressive forces. How can progressives extricate their internationalism from neoliberal globalism, the mass dislike of the latter being a primary fuel to the current right-wing populist upsurge? In this context, agrarian and food sovereignty movements have already taken a few modest but crucial steps forward, and its historical roots are deep, far beyond 1993, the founding year of La Via Campesina.

Conclusion

I conclude these preliminary notes by going back to Bernstein’s appeal for Marxist political economists to take agrarian politics and agrarian populism seriously. Taking signal from the attitude that some of the intellectuals of the 1880s Russian People’s Will had towards Marxism, it is critical for those who identify with contemporary left-wing agrarian populism to take Marxist agrarian political economy and socialist politics seriously. This intellectual and political reciprocity does not undermine the fundamental standpoint of each camp. Shanin observed the process between the People’s Will’s intellectuals and Marx, how each treated the other seriously and how each was willing to concede some important elements in one’s perspective. “That does not make Marx into a populist or turn members of the People’s Will into crypto-marxists. They were political allies, who supported and influenced each other” (Shanin 1983c: 268). Perhaps the relationship between Nikolai Chernyshevskii (see Chernyshevskii 1983) on the one side, and Marx and Lenin on the other side is a good example from that generation. As Shanin (1983c) noted – and again following our earlier discussion about the politics of naming and labeling and the use of the term ‘populism’ – Lenin quite admired Chernyshevskii and would not want to deploy the derogatory use of the term ‘populist’ on him; this was resolved by Lenin by calling Chernyshevskii a ‘revolutionary democrat’ (which Shanin observed to be semantically unrelated to ‘populist’) (Shanin 1983b: 35). There are a few contemporary scholars across disciplines whose bodies of work (theoretical, empirical or methodological) reflect a serious attempt at dynamically navigating this terrain, in significantly varying extents and from

different ideological traditions, such as Harriet Friedmann, Philip McMichael, Jan Douwe van der Ploeg³⁴, White (2018a, 2018n), James C. Scott and Teodor Shanin. My sense is that the most recent call from Bernstein will definitely help expand this terrain with possible new interest and excitement from *younger generation* of progressive intellectuals and activists.

The preliminary notes sketched in this paper offer no definitive answers to many open-ended questions and dilemmas identified so far. Yet, there are a few tentative conclusions that can be made pending more careful theoretical and empirical research and respectful political conversations. There is nothing inherently regressive or reactionary in populism. It is not inherently class blind, and it is not necessarily contradictory to fundamental class struggles.

In terms of academic research, deepening and systematizing our theoretical *and* empirical understanding of the awkward, and in some instances troubling, relationship between right-wing populism and agrarian movements is urgent and necessary. A potentially rewarding approach in this context is a tradition that combines theoretical *and* practical political work, i.e. scholar-activism.³⁵ In terms of practical political work, thinking about and building a global broad united front – sort of a reformulated left-wing populism, that is class-conscious, anti-capitalist and socialist in orientation – against the latest episode of global right-wing populist 'upsurge', 'consensus at the center' and global capitalism, is an urgent task that is difficult but not impossible. It entails a challenge to reclaim populism without its authoritarian trappings on the one hand, and without some of the utopian, conservative or reactionary aspects of its romantic restorative tendencies on the other hand.

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³⁴ It is impossible to refer to a specific work or two for each of these three scholars to illustrate what is being insinuated here for it is indeed about the evolution of their body of work. But for relatively recent specific publications, refer to Friedmann (2016), McMichael (2008, 2015), van der Ploeg (2013, 2018).

³⁵ This is the approach used by the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiatives (ERPI, www.iss.nl/erpi) in its work on 'authoritarian populism and the rural world.' On relevant discussions about scholar-activism, see Borras (2016), Edelman (2006), Fox Piven (2010) and Hale (2006).

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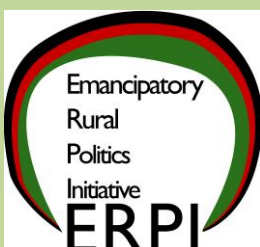
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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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